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CRIME WITHOUT PUNISHMENT

MIKE SHAYNE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

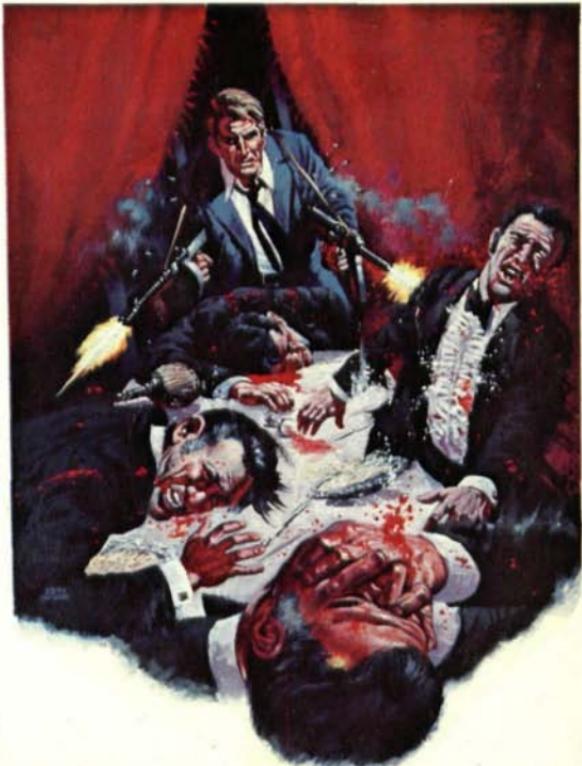
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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1976
VOL. 38, NO. 4

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

CRIME WITHOUT PUNISHMENT

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The big puzzle about the two suicides was why a pair of young men who seemed to have everything should choose to do away with themselves in such rapid succession. The parents of Roland McHenry asked Shayne to investigate their son's death by drowning, and the redhead drew a blank—until murder of a third young man blew the case.

2 to 59

A THRILLING NEW NOVELET
THE OMEGA SERVICE

JERRY JACOBSON 74

SIX EXCITING NEW STORIES

THREE MAN WOMAN

WYC TOOLE 62

YOUR CHOICE

JACK FOXX 97

CHASE THE QUEEN

GEORGE WARREN 103

DUMB WITNESS

MICHAEL MOORE 113

LEO MARGULIES

Publisher

IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE?

JAMES HOLDING 117

CYLVIA KLEINMAN

Managing Editor

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

WILLIAM P. NOBLE 124

LAURIE ROSE

Subscriptions

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CRIME WITHOUT PUNISHMENT

Rolly McHenry's parents could not believe their boy committed suicide. So they called in Shayne to investigate and he uncovered a well concealed train of robbery and murder.

by BRETT HALLIDAY



THE MAN SPRAWLED on the pale yellow carpeting was grotesquely propped against the front of the couch. It was as if he had been driven back by a tremendous and paralyzing force. He lay limp, unmoving, his knees spread, his arms flaccid. His head was turned slightly and his chin rested against his collarbone. His color was ashen. There was a gaping hole in his chest. Life was flowing from him. His blood had already soaked his white silk shirt, two

rivulets of crimson had snaked on down to stain the yellow carpeting.

Shayne went to one knee beside the dying man. His rugged face was rock hard, the muscles of his body tense as he used a thumb to tip a battered hat to the back of his red head. Shaggy eyebrows bunched, busy gray eyes studied, ears were tuned. But the plush apartment was quiet. No sound came to Shayne from the other rooms.

The Miami private detective

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Featuring

MIKE SHAYNE



hooked a forefinger under the chin of the inert man, tipped the man's head up. Long brown hair hung against the silk shirt. He wasn't quite dead. In his youthful face, eyelids fluttered, opened. Dark eyes remained blank for a few seconds, then a spark of recognition brought them alive.

"S-Shayne..." the dying man mumbled.

"Who hit you?" said the redhead.

"M-man at the door... stranger... six-six-two, one-ninety-five to two-o-five... Negroid... blue suit, blue shirt, white tie... neat... polished black shoes... large ring small finger left hand, diamond... or glass... scar right jawline... halfway... shaped like a pecan..."

The man stirred, stiffened.

"Why?" said Shayne.

The man sucked a rattling breath. Pain flooded his eyes. His mouth and jaws drew tight in a grimacee. "Kennedy," he breathed. "Tape... the bath, clothes hamper... buried... deep inside..."

He shuddered and went totally limp. He was dead.

Shayne eased the chin down and rose to step over the legs of the dead man and enter the bedroom. It was a vast room, the king-size bed neatly made. Light came from the open door

of a glistening bathroom beyond.

He spotted the dirty clothes hamper and dug into it, yanking out each piece of clothing and dangling it before dropping it. The pile built swiftly on the tile floor. Then he found the rolled soiled towel. There was a small box inside. From the box he took a tape.

He stood in silent debate with himself. He should report the death to the cops, turn over the tape.

But what was on the tape? Was its content not for public record? Why? And who, or what, was Kennedy?

Kennedy Airport in New York?

Shayne bounced the box in his hand. Would it help him solve the mystery of another death, the drowning of a boy?

He decided to run the tape before going to the police. Maybe he was getting somewhere—finally. It had been a long almost fruitless two days since he had received the telephone summons from Roland McHenry II.

Their phone conversation had been brisk and brief but enough was said—including the offer of a healthy fee—to intrigue Shayne.

McHenry closed his end of the call by requesting a 4 p.m. meeting at his residence in the

exclusive Green Palms section of Miami.

"Right," the detective replied.

The hour of the meeting allowed him time to go through a stack of week-old newspapers while his secretary, Lucy Hamilton, immediately turned to putting together an outline dossier of the caller.

The name McHenry had jangled two bells. Shayne remembered a recent reported drowning and Lucy recalled an October outdoor party that had had most of Miami's bluebloods shuffling nervously until invitations appeared in the mail.

Shayne found the newspapers he wanted. A yacht outing had ended in tragedy. Three Green Palms couples had gone on an overnight cruise into the Atlantic, but only five people had returned. Roland McHenry III, aged 23, had not. It was presumed by the five returnees that young McHenry had tumbled from the craft sometime during the night, although no one aboard admitted witnessing this happening.

The Coast Guard had conducted an investigation. An official ruling was pending. No body had been found or been reported picked up by another craft, but it was presumed Roland McHenry III had been lost at sea. A private memorial service for the boy had been held

on Monday, the previous afternoon.

Lucy Hamilton placed a neatly typed sheet of paper in a new file folder labeled MCHENRY II, ROLAND C. on the detective's desk. He read the resumé quickly, grunted and cocked a reddish eyebrow at his secretary.

She permitted herself a smile. "I just happen to know Josh Adams, the party designer who handled the October McHenry affair—and party designers compile *complete* dossiers. Roland McHenry II is Mr. Real Estate. He's loaded, Michael. As a personal footnote, Josh adds that Mr. and Mrs. McHenry are down-to-earth people—appealing."

Shayne's impression when he confronted the McHenrys at their elegant Green Palms area residence that bright Tuesday afternoon in November was that Josh Adams was a connoisseur of people. Roland McHenry II had a firm handshake and exuded a genuine welcome to his home. Mrs. McHenry made Shayne think he might find a plate of freshly baked homemade cookies awaiting him when he accepted her invitation to adjourn to poolside.

There were no cookies.

McHenry did not waste time. "As I said on the phone, Mr.

Shayne, I want you to investigate a death—possibly a murder."

"I've read some back newspapers since talking to you," the redhead said. "The Coast Guard thinks accident—but you think your son may have been murdered?"

"If Rollie was, we—that is, Margaret and I—don't think it was intentional. If Rollie was killed intentionally, we'd be—well, flabbergasted.

"No, we think his death probably was accidental. There was some horsing around aboard the yacht, maybe some playful pushing and shoving—young people are filled with energy—and Rollie went over the side. He probably was knocked unconscious or injured when he hit the water.

"What bothers Margaret and me is the lying. We're not saying *everyone* aboard the yacht is lying. Some of them may have been below deck, as they say they were. But we think one or two persons are not telling the truth. We think there was the horsing, Rollie went over, there was a search. But they lost him in the darkness and finally came in after deciding to lie."

"Why would they lie if it was accidental, Mr. McHenry?"

"Fear of the possible consequence, I suppose. The publicity—the police. Except for

Sally Wooten, the yacht owner, they are young people, Mr. Shayne, still children in many ways. They still use lying as an easy out of things."

"Rollie was a strong swimmer, Mr. Shayne," Mrs. McHenry put in.

Shayne said, "That water out there is rough. A man would need support—life jacket, raft—something to cling to after only a short time."

"It must have been horrible for him," said Mrs. McHenry, biting her lower lip. "Can you imagine being there in the dark water, shouting but helpless, watching the lights of a yacht circle you..." Her voice broke.

"Margaret, perhaps I should talk to Mr. Shayne alone," her husband suggested gently.

She nodded and rose. She looked drawn, but walked erect as she disappeared into the house.

McHenry hunched forward in his chair. He pulled down a necktie, opened his shirt. "My wife is a strong woman, Shayne, but Rollie was an only child."

Shayne noticed the dropping of the "Mr." and felt more at ease. "Level with me, McHenry."

McHenry interlocked fingers, turned his palms out with a quick movement, snapped knuckles. "Excuse me. I quit

smoking recently, now I have to find something to do with my hands.

"The boy is gone. Hell, I know that. I *accept* it. It probably happened exactly as we've been told. He slipped and fell over the side. Or maybe he was drunk and *fell* over the side. Either way, no one saw him, and it was a long time before the others realized he was gone. Too long. Still—"

He snapped his knuckles again. "Well, Margaret isn't ready to accept Rollie's death that flatly. It's too black and white for her. Eventually she'll come around, of course, but for the moment. . . Shayne, do you understand what the hell I'm trying to say? I'll do anything for Margaret—anything at all—anything."

The redhead nodded.

The knuckles cracked again. "I confess, I've got a monkey on my back, too, Sally Wooten, the yacht owner, the skipper. I dislike her, I distrust her. There was Rollie and his crowd, all young people, twenty-one to twenty-three years old. Then there's Sally Wooten, ten years their senior, but she runs with them. I don't understand the attraction either way, but it exists. And I dislike her for it, I blame her for keeping the attraction alive, and I'm wrong in doing that,



right? Continued attraction has to be a two-way street."

"Where does the distrust fit?" Shayne asked bluntly.

McHenry looked up at the detective without shifting his position. "It's just a nagging suspicion in the back of my head. I cannot give you one concrete reason why I distrust her. I'm wrong again, I suppose."

"Nope," said the detective. "I'm still breathing because of a couple of similar suspicions down through the years. It's called sixth sense, McHenry. Do you think your son would commit suicide?"

II

MCHENRY SAT BACK in his chair. "No," he said after a few moments. His brow furrowed sud-

denly. "A friend of Rollie's, Thomas Dobson..."

He let the thought and words dangle, lapsed into silence, his forehead furrowed. Shayne said, "Who is Thomas Dobson?"

"Thomas and Rollie were close friends. The Dobsons live in the area. Thomas and Rollie grew up together. But Thomas committed suicide about four months ago. It was in July. His parents were away at the time, in New York City. Thomas was staying at the house alone. One of the security people who patrol Green Palms found the boy in his car in the garage. A hose had been attached."

McHenry looked Shayne straight in the eye. "But there can be no connection between Thomas Dobson's suicide and Rollie going over the side of a yacht. You mentioned suicide, and I immediately thought about Thomas. His death is still fresh in our memories."

Shayne said, "Okay, can you think of any reason your son might want to disappear?"

McHenry frowned again.

"This could be a conspiracy," said Shayne. "The yacht could have been met by another craft at sea and your son transferred, or he could have been put ashore up the coast or on any one of the keys—then the yacht returned here and a concocted story told to cover him."

McHenry shook his head. "Barbara would have gone with him—Barbara Coulter, Rollie's girlfriend. She was aboard and—well, Barbara is pregnant. Margaret and I know the Coulters. How we know is not important. All of us have been waiting for the kids to come to us and announce wedding plans."

"So if there were liars aboard the yacht," Shayne said, "Miss Coulter is not among them?"

"Barbara was below deck, asleep. She was awakened when it was discovered Rollie was missing."

"A moment ago, one of your theories was your son might have been intoxicated and fallen—"

"Not my theory, Shayne," interrupted McHenry. "Rollie was intoxicated that night, according to the others, including Barbara. There was liquor aboard. My son liked a drink. He became intoxicated, he and Barbara went to sleep. When she was awakened, Rollie was gone. One member of the group—a young man named Stan Gold whom I do not know—suggested that Rollie may have been awakened by nature's urge, gone topside instead of into the head and fallen overboard. That could have happened."

"I thought all of those aboard

resided here in Green Palms. The newspaper accounts I read—”

“I saw that, too.” McHenry nodded. “But it is not true. Either the reporter missed the fact that this young man, Gold, is not a resident of the area or he took a little literary license. I said I do not know Gold. I don’t. However, I talked to him the afternoon of the day Rollie was reported missing, just a week ago.

“I talked to everyone who was aboard, naturally. Mr. Gold has been dating Etta Sales in recent weeks. Etta and Barbara are close friends.

“Mr. Gold is a newcomer to Miami, I understand, from New Hampshire. He lives alone in an apartment complex on Ayers called Executive Square. I got the address from Etta.

“I found him to be an understanding but rather an unemotional young man, at least on the surface. Perhaps that is his New Hampshire rearing. I left him with the feeling he had, to the best of his knowledge, answered every question I asked, yet had not volunteered one piece of information.”

“Is he one of your liars?”

McHenry took a moment to gnaw his lower lip before looking the detective in the eye. “No, I don’t think he is. He and Etta say they were below deck,

playing cribbage and drinking beer when Sally Wooten poked her head in the room and asked about Rollie. Etta volunteered that information and Gold confirmed it when I asked him.”

“Which doesn’t mean anything,” said Shayne. “Okay, Etta Sales is not a liar, Stan Gold is not a liar, Barbara Coulter is not a liar. You haven’t actually said it, but I’m assuming you think Sally Wooten *could be* a liar. And we’re still dealing in plurals.” Shayne let it dangle.

“Frank Danforth.” McHenry pinched his nose. “Dammit, Shayne, Judge Danforth and Norma are good people. The two girls, their daughters, each married, good people—and then there is Frank.”

Shayne picked it up. “Is the wart on an otherwise smooth thumb?”

“More like an irritating pimple that defies medication,” said McHenry.

“Except to Sally Wooten.”

McHenry lifted an eyebrow. “You’re going to be worth every penny, Shayne,” he said. “Ms. Wooten caters to young people. Frank is a young person. Yes, at the moment, Frank Danforth and Sally Wooten.”

“And Frank could be a liar?”

“Anything Sally Wooten told him to be. She uses people, Shayne.”

"Frank and Rollie, McHenry?"

McHenry hesitated. "Close for years, like Barbara and Etta. Once it was Rollie and Thomas Dobson and Frank. Now—well, there's only Frank left."

"There had to be a tie," nodded Shayne. "Your son and Barbara Coulter, Barbara and Etta, Etta and Stan Gold, back to your son and Frank Danforth, Frank and Sally Wooten."

"Frank confided in Rollie. I think Rollie may have been the only person in the world Frank Danforth *would* confide in."

"And Frank Danforth is capable of lying, even where it concerns your son?"

"Frank protects Frank at all cost. It is not a nice opinion of another person to have, but it is mine of Frank Danforth. I have never understood, Shayne, the closeness between Rollie and Frank—or, when he was alive, the closeness between Thomas Dobson and Frank. Frank will turn on anyone."

Shayne stood, took a bent cigaret from a crushed package in his coat pocket. He dangled the cigaret from a corner of his mouth, found a packet of matches. McHenry watched him from hungry eyes. Shayne yanked the cigaret from his mouth.

"Go ahead," said McHenry,

"Smoke. I'd like to have a puff. But I don't dare. I'd be off to buy a carton."

Shayne lighted up, puffed hard. McHenry walked to the edge of the swimming pool, stood staring at the smoothness of the blue-tinted water.

Shayne took in the green spaciousness of the lawn. His gaze moved around the grounds, swept a four-stall garage. All the stalls were open and occupied by polished and expensive automobiles.

Why would a youth reared in all of this commit suicide? Why would he want to leave it, disappear?

Or why would he be murdered?

III

TWO DAYS OF ROUETING people and firing pointed questions left Mike Shayne with little more than he had had when he had left Roland McHenry II standing at his swimming pool. Barbara Coulter was pregnant and distraught. Etta Sales was calmer, had accepted the drowning of Rollie McHenry III, but was worried about the mental condition of her friend Barbara.

Stan Gold was aloof, answered questions, but not readily, volunteered nothing. Shayne agreed with McHenry. Gold was a cold fish. Frank

Danforth left a sour taste; the wall was up, he was defensive, uptight, hardnosed, attempted to cover the tautness with cockiness, cool. Sally Wooten was tough, aggressive, uncooperative, unattractive. Her weathered skin reminded Shayne of elephant hide.

Barbara and Rollie had gone to bed together aboard the yacht. Rollie had been intoxicated. Not falling-down drunk—happily intoxicated. They had conversed about the future—abortion, marriage or simply living together. They had made love and gone to sleep. Barbara had been awakened by a worried Sally Wooten, Etta Sales and Stan Gold. Rollie could not be found aboard the yacht.

Etta Sales and Stan Gold also had been below deck, in other quarters, sipping beer and playing cribbage, taking a respite from the night wind, the noise of the rolling water and the drunken fumblings of Frank Danforth.

Then Sally had come below. It was time for dancing on deck. Everybody topside! Except Rollie McHenry could not be found.

Sally Wooten had decided on the overnighter because it was a good night for sailing, she had a yacht and she felt like sailing. Sally Wooten did most

things she felt like doing. Her father was a United States ambassador in South America.

Sure, Sally liked young people. Why the hell not? Young people kept her *alive!* The hell with the stuffed crows of Green Palms. Her gig was with the young birds, the chirp-chirpers. That's where the action was.

"You like action, Shayne? Let's go swimming in my pool. Naked. Sure, it's mid-afternoon, so what? I'll just slip out of these things, and you slip out of . . .

"That night on the yacht? Quit harping on that. It's done, finished! It was an accident! The dumb kid fell over the side! Hell, I wasn't a chaperone out there, just trying to provide a little fun! I don't have to talk to you. I told it all to the Coast Guard!

"Yeah, yeah, Frankie and I were top, the others below—Jesus, don't you ever quit pressing?—Frankie got out of his craw, too much, you know what I mean? Or don't you drink, either? So we needed a little action, a little music, some dancing. I went down to gather the dull tools, stir the pot. Rollie was gone. No one knew where. And when we couldn't find him aboard, we had to figure he went over the side.

"Flippant? I can be any God-damn thing I want to be; Get the hell out of my house Shayne! Take all of that red-headed manliness up on top of a tall building somewhere and fall off!"

Frank Danforth was a cool gunner. Just ask him. Sally Wooten? She was a *friend*. He *liked* older people. He always had been around older people, his parents, his sisters, their husbands. Just because he was only twenty-three, did that mean he couldn't like older people?

Rollie McHenry? Yeah, Rollie had been his age and his good friend, too. Rollie was a good guy. They'd been on the same wavelength. Sure, he was upset about Rollie being dead. He wished they'd never gone out on the yacht that night. But they had. And now Rollie was gone.

No, he didn't know what happened. He'd been bombed out. He remembered the early evening, everybody on deck; he and Rollie had been having a good time, kicks, then Barbara had wanted to go to bed. She had wanted Rollie to go with her. He had. That was the last time he had seen his friend.

Shayne also had been to Coast Guard headquarters. He had not been allowed to read the official file. Rather, he had

been quizzed bluntly by a steely-eyed lieutenant who demanded to know why a private eye was investigating the disappearance of Roland McHenry III from a yacht. He had told the steely-eyed lieutenant why, but all that seemed to have done was add another shield of ice to the lieutenant's stare.

A report to Roland McHenry II was due. McHenry wasn't going to get much for \$3,000. But the fee had been McHenry's offer.

Shayne put out the lights, locked up and left his Flagler Street office. It was almost 10:30 on a warm Thursday night. His footsteps made hollow sounds in the vacated building. There was the hum of air-conditioning. Somewhere wheels squeaked, the cleaning crew was at work in the corridors.

Outside, he got into his car, lighted a cigaret, sat for a few moments thumping the steering wheel. Traffic rolled up and down the street past him, pedestrians walked. It was a pleasant evening, people were cruising, involved in action or looking for action.

It had been another chamber of commerce Gold Coast night when six people had gone out on a yacht too...

Damn, he wished he had something solid to give McHen-

ry! Mentally he went over the report again, the people involved. There was the kicker, the people!

He could write off Barbara Coulter and Etta Sales. He was satisfied with his opinion of each girl. But Sally Wooten, Frank Danforth and Stan Gold were different colored horses.

The floundering Ms. Wooten lighted fires in his blood. She could tell the truth, she could lie, it was only a matter of which faucet she turned. McHenry had her cold—he brought alive instinctive distrust.

Frank Danforth wanted watching too. He was cocky, conceited, hard—maybe mean—and restless. His eyes betrayed him. They were nervous eyes, always moving, alert and fencing, quick to stab, quick to seize opportunity, equally quick to be on guard. Frank Danforth watched out for Frank Danforth.

All of it made him a dangerous person to know.

But Stan Gold was the real cockleburr of the bunch. Gold bothered him. A man could tag Sally Wooten, Frank Danforth—they were obvious. But there was a subtle slickness about Gold. Shayne had crossed his kind before. In his long experience of dealing with people, there had been a few



others carrying credentials identical to Stan Gold's. They were called con men.

He turned the Buick from its path to Green Palms and cut across sidestreets to Ayers Drive. The apartment complex was well-lighted. He turned in, found a hole beside a polished black sports heap that belonged to Gold and eased the car in. He had parked beside the same car in the same stall on his previous trip.

The detective punched the buzzer of 10B several times. No answer. He scowled, looked around the patio. All the other unit doors were closed tight with no one in sight. He punched the buzzer button again. Nothing.

Shayne went to the pool area, stood back on the grass in the shadows, surveying. There were feminine pulchritude and young manliness here and there—most of it bare. But no Stan Gold.

He returned to Gold's patio. He could try the buzzer again—maybe Gold had been out dumping garbage—or he could go on to the Buick, catch Gold in the morning, report to McHenry later.

A door behind Shayne opened. He turned. A willowy young blonde stepped from an apartment unit, stopped in mild surprise. A dachshund strained frantically against the leash in the blonde's hand. The dog didn't give a damn about finding a stranger on his patio.

"Oh, hi," said the blonde with a quick smile. "You startled me. I didn't expect—"

"Looking for Stan Gold," interrupted Shayne.

The blonde said, "That's his apartment right there in front of you. I think he's home. At least he was about thirty minutes ago. He was going in when I came down from the pool."

She disappeared into the larkness with the straining dog. Shayne put a thumb against the door buzzer, pressed hard, kept the thumb on the button for a long time. No Stan

Gold opened the door. He shuffled, then tried the knob of Gold's door. Surprisingly, it turned.

He held the knob, glanced over his shoulder. No blonde, no one else. All of the other doors still closed tight. He pushed Gold's door slightly, made a crack. There was light in the crack, but no sound came to him.

He opened the door, stepped inside quickly, closed the door behind him, held onto the knob. He was prepared for almost anything except the sight of the sprawled Stan Gold with the large hole in his chest, a white silk shirt soaking up blood.

IV

STAN GOLD'S TAPE was secure in Mike Shayne's coat pocket when he returned to the apartment door. He glanced back at the dead Gold.

Shayne briefly eyed the telephone across the room. He could call the cops from here. But he didn't have time to get hung up in questions about body discovery—not at the moment. First he'd learn what was on the tape and then he'd go to the police.

He put an ear against the door. No sound came from outside. He stepped out, instantly saw the blonde. She was fitting

a key into her door; the dachshund no longer was straining.

"See you around, Stan," Shayne called over his shoulder. He shut the door behind him, nodded to the blonde, yanked the brim of his hat low and moved to his car. When he drove away from the apartment, he spotted the blonde looking after him. She was curious. That wasn't good, he decided.

Shayne put some pressure on the accelerator. He'd have to hustle. The blonde could find the body, call the cops, describe the large, rumpled, tough-looking redhead stranger who had come out of Gold's apartment. And Shayne wanted uninterrupted time to listen to the tape, digest its content.

He cruised just under the speed limit as he pointed the car across town, keeping a sharp eye in the rear-view mirror. The presence of the blonde had been a stroke of bad luck. On the other hand, the blonde had told him something. She had seen Gold alive. Thirty minutes later, the guy had been hit. Assuming she had been inside her place during those thirty minutes and that there were other occupants inside the apartments around the patio, the hit man must have used a silencer.

And a silencer smelled of a professional job.

Shayne's frown deepened. What made Gold so important to someone? Pro croakers cost a bundle. Who the hell had Gold been?

BUBBA RING stood six-five in flat bare feet and weighed 312 pounds. He was shiny black and jolly. He laughed a lot—he had since the day he realized he had been born in and lived in a ghetto. It was better than sitting on a stoop, moping and decaying.

He had made another discovery young, too. The black flab was deceiving. Under it lay the strength of an ox. He was a strong boy. And there were talent hunters around with large rolls of green bills in the pockets of their flashy threads who were looking for strong boys. The hunters paid cash for broken arms, snapped legs, split fingers, crushed chests, cracked spines.

They didn't care if a man chuckled while carrying out these rather ego-lifting chores, either.

Thank God he had been born with size and strength. There was a primrose path out of the ghetto after all. Thank God, that was, until he came up against a redhead shamus named Mike Shayne.

Shayne was big, okay—not fat—in shape and he could handle himself. But Shayne wasn't six-five, didn't have 300 pounds to use, and sure as hell wasn't as strong as Bubba Ring. No man he ever heard of was.

But Shayne's bones had the texture of steel, his muscles the elasticity of new rubber. In addition, he had a high pain threshold, he had stamina, and he was deceptively quick. Too, he knew where to poke. Like those stiff-fingered jabs into the Adam's apple. Those hurt. And the slash of elbows against the ears. Firecrackers stuck in and lighted by some sadistic kid couldn't have made him feel much worse.

Then there was the butting against the teeth with the top of a concrete head, the breathtaking slam of large fists—like sledgehammers—into the solar plexus, knees into the groin, toes of shoes numbing knee-caps, the same shoes slicing ankles.

Shayne was an alley fighter, one tough sumbitch.

Worse, he didn't go away when it was finished. He didn't take his victory—figuring he was lucky this time—and run. He put a black wrist high up on a black spine and he kept the pressure on while asking questions.

Shayne had a client in the hospital. He wanted to know who had put his client there and who had paid the muscle to crush the chest of his client so thoroughly.

Laughter was gone—but not a sense of self-preservation. Who wanted an arm yanked from a socket; who needed an elbow jackknifed permanently in the opposite direction?

Bubba had bled—there had been no recourse, no other way out.

Then Shayne surprised again. He had turned out to be a dude stuffed with a sense of right and wrong. This from an ape so primitive in combat? Heavy, man!

There had been a trip to the cop shop, where they hadn't even slowed at the desk of the bored booking sergeant who knew Bubba Ring on a first-name basis. This time Bubba was hauled straight up to the Top Cat, a guy named Gentry, the chief of police, a bulldog who chomped hard on the black stub of a cigar and allowed as he didn't like having his streets littered with the leavings of paid muscle.

Another dude stuffed with a sense of right and wrong—and on a first name basis with the Herculean Shayne—heavy, heavy, heavy.

It had gotten Bubba Ring five

in the slammer, where he had had lots of time to weigh the advantage of being on a first name "Hi yuh" with a chief of police over a booking sergeant who was doodling away time until retirement. Something foreign to his nature had slowly come alive. He discovered he had *respect* for a redheaded bull named Shayne.

This, sandwiched between the mysteries and prospects of another awakening.

It came to Bubba that he liked fiddling with electronic gadgetry, and he suddenly found himself at peace while probing the innards of television sets, stereos, tape recorders and players.

Two months after walking out of the slammer, he had scraped together and spent all the loot left over from his days of breaking skulls and opened a tiny electronics shop where he had learned to laugh again—without crushing skulls.

Now Bubba Ring was fifty-two years of age and loaded. But he still operated from the tiny shop. What matter the size of a mine as long as it produced?

"Shayne, man!" he exploded in greeting.

Shayne put out a flat palm. Bubba's slap of five was strong, his grin television-commercial white. He chuckled. "Baby,

don't you-all know it's the Deb-bil's Hour, midnight? Some cats snooze, yuh dig?"

"Thanks for opening up, Bubba."

Shayne tossed the tape box he had taken from Stan Gold's apartment. It disappeared inside the huge Black's large hand.

"That could be hot stuff," said Shayne. "A corpse gave it to me."

"Oh, beautiful!"

"Rig me? Private."

"Séance ain't exactly my bag, baby." Bubba's polished grin went a mile wide. "But then neither was legit bread 'til a hardnosed shamus stomped my tootsies."

Bubba Ring piloted Shayne to a tiny glass cubicle in a far corner. He worked with the tape inside the cubicle, then stepped outside. He swept a palm to the booth. "Hooked for séance, man. Watch out for ghosts."

The tape was a verbal diary. Stan Gold had spent most of that Thursday talking to those who had been aboard Sally Wooten's yacht the night Rollie McHenry III went over the side. Young McHenry's fate was the subject. Stan Gold had been particularly interested in obtaining opinions. He had asked two pertinent questions—was the death accidental and, if it

was not, why had Rollie been pushed?

Barbara Coulter's reply to both questions, according to the ghost narrator, had been tears and bewilderment over why such questions were even asked. Etta Sales had been spaced out by the workings of Gold's mind, his intent, the motivation behind the askings. Frank Danforth had been surprised by the questions, then belligerent, then defensive.

Rollie's death had been accidental, what else? Then, "Gold, what are you *after*?" And finally, "It was *dark* out there, man! I was bombed out! Paralyzed! What would I see? I was *snoozing*!"

Sally Wooten had become instantly hard. "No questions, no answers, Mr. Gold, the dumb kid is dead. Buzz off. Out of my house. Buzz back up to your little New Hampshire and papa's woolen mills. You damn Yankees don't belong down here."

There was a pause on the tape, then the ghost's voice returned. "Arrow Patrol Service, a protection agency with a private contract with Green Palms residents. Checked? Their cars are in the area on a twenty-four-hour basis. Might be worth..."

A foreign sound cut off the voice. Gold returned, "Someone at the door..."

That was it. No more Gold. Shayne snapped off the button, stopped the minute whirring. He sat slumped as he pondered: What did he have?

One, there seemed to be no question in Gold's mind that young McHenry was dead. And Gold was thinking accidental death or murder, not suicide.

Two, Gold had been pressing to find the killer. He apparently had not had a suspect who stood head and shoulders above the others aboard the yacht. He had braced the two girls, the woman, Frank Danforth equally.

Three, Gold had leaned to murder in his thinking or he would not have asked his second question.

Four, in a breath, Gold had switched from summarizing the results of his questioning to suggesting investigation of a private patrol agency.

Five, Gold had been reporting to someone who later would hear the tape.

Six, Gold had been interrupted by a hit man punching his door buzzer but had taken time to secrete the tape before going to the door. Gold had been extremely cautious.

Shayne scowled and left the booth. Bubba Ring inventoried him, wagged his head. "You-all ain't happy, baby. Your séance friend, he jiving you?"



Bubba entered the cubicle, removed the tape from the player and closed the box. He tossed it to Shayne as the detective growled, "Got a man, Bubba. Six foot, little higher, around two hundred pounds, neat in dress, diamond ring small finger left hand, pecan-shaped scar halfway along the right jawline. He's black, a croaker, pro, used a big gun with a silencer."

"Ooo-eee, you-all *do* got yo-self a prize cat, baby!" Bubba

breathed. He thought a while before shaking his head. "No flashes."

"He could be an out-of-town man."

"Un-huh."

"You'll sniff?"

"Like a starving dog."

"Not too eager, Bubba."

"No sweat, baby. Ol' Bubba got eyes in his sitter when he sniffin' for bad news." His chortle was deep.

"I have to call the cops."

Bubba jerked a thumb over a meaty shoulder. Shayne went to the wall phone, gave the police an anonymous tip where they could find a murder victim. When he had finished Bubba was waiting for him at the street door. They slapped five.

"Peace." Bubba Ring laughed.

"Yeah." Shayne growled. He stepped outside into a dark, early Friday morning.

V

WILL GENTRY, chief of Miami police, was a bulldog who had few, if any, peers at his work. Mike Shayne had known Gentry for years. They were warriors in a common cause. They fought crime, Gentry with his rules, Shayne without. Gentry, because he was a civil servant, was forced to live with thorns in his fight—politics, civil

rights, tax dollars and obligations, bureaucracy. Shayne, because he was an unfettered individualist, enjoyed the luxury of being a free swinger.

There were rules, but he could bend them like pretzels without becoming ulcerated. These paths occasionally produced crossed swords, of course—conformity vs. nonconformity, rules vs. no rules. Shayne and Gentry sometimes glared at one another, but beneath the glint of those glares there was deep-seated tolerance, respect, friendship.

Friendship, on the other hand, did not launder all things between two men. For instance, on that particular, brilliant Friday morning in late November, it did not obliterate the fact that Will Gentry arrived at his office at 8 a.m.—to find a restless Mike Shayne awaiting him—in a sour frame of mind.

Vandals had painted an obscene epithet on the side of his expensive boat during the night. He had received a phone call from someone at the marina before leaving his Bal Harbor home that morning, and he was bitterly sour. Nor was the presence of Shayne so early in the day salve.

Gentry's scowl deepened as he flicked a look at the detective. The burnt end of a black

cigar butt, clamped in a corner of his turned-down mouth, went up another half inch. He hustled behind his desk and immediately became busy with the stack of overnight reports. It was as if Shayne was not in the room.

Finally, without looking up, Gentry growled, "Okay, you're on your way home. Yesterday was a long day. Or you're heading for Flagler Street—fresh day, rested crime buster on the make for a quick buck. Either way, keep going. No time for rapping on this end."

"You got a sheet in that stack on a Stanley Gold?" returned Shayne. "Deceased, homicide."

Gentry looked up. His face darkened, jaws tightened, the cigar butt quivered. He held Shayne with a hard look for a moment, then yanked up a phone and called for the Stanley Gold package.

He went through the folder swiftly, but Shayne knew his quick mind was absorbing every detail the Homicide boys had put in the report. When Gentry finally sat back, Gentry fixed the detective with a stare that would have made most men shrivel.

Suddenly he stabbed the folder repeatedly with a stubby index finger. "This is stinking up my office!" he snarled. "You

know what I've got here? I've got a corpse labeled Gold, Stanley S. Once Gold, Stanley S., was a young man, apparently lolling in the high income bracket, source of income unknown. That was yesterday, before Gold, Stanley S., got a hole in his chest, source of said hole unknown. But it was a big heater.

"I've got an excited and frightened neighbor named Helen Gourley who reported the demise of one Gold, Stanley S. How she found the corpse is clear. She opened Gold's apartment door last night and looked inside his pad. But what motivated Miss Gourley to open that door is unclear. Even Miss Gourley is not sure now why she opened the door. She wishes she hadn't.

"However, Miss Gourley is very clear about something else. *She saw the killer.* He was a large, redhead Neanderthal man who visited our Mr. Gold, Stanley S., in his apartment last night. More, Miss Gourley *talked* to the Neanderthal man. He was very scary, quite capable of killing.

"Then, I've got an anonymous phone call to the police recorded at twelve forty-two this a.m., said caller directing Homicide to the corpse that once was Gold, Stanley S. Natch, the caller would not

know that his tip was cold—Homicide already was on the scene, called by a screaming Miss Helen Gourley."

Gentry stopped talking, suddenly slammed a fist on the folder. Everything on his desk quivered. "Goddamnit, Mike, cops don't have time for mysteries! My time is all used up by platter cases!"

"According to the Gourley woman, you were at Gold's place between eleven-o-five and eleven fifteen last night. She can pinpoint it because she knows that's when she was out walking her dog! But you don't call Homicide until twelve-forty this morning! That's one hour and twenty-five minutes I want accounted for! Now!"

"Plus, *who* was Gold, what business did you have with him? And don't give me bull about saying good night to the guy—which the Gourley woman says you did. Gold was already dead. Okay, shoot. No, mysteries. Make it a palter case, very simple, very clear, very concise."

Shayne lighted a fresh cigaret, got up and paced the confines of the office, smoking hard and fast. "Gold didn't belong to you? He wasn't undercover?"

Gentry snorted. "Platter!"

Shayne yanked an earlobe. Platter cases in cop parlance

were those in which there was no question about who was dead, who had killed or why there had been a killing—those in which the killer was easily apprehended.

Shayne dug Stan Gold's tape out of his pocket and tossed it to Gentry. "That's where I was. *Listening.*"

Then he filled in the police chief while a tape player was being rolled into the office. Gentry growled, "The McHenry boy is Coast Guard. Out of our jurisdiction."

"A hit man isn't" Shayne reminded him.

Gentry's look was ice. "How many real pros hang their hats in Miami, shamus? You want to count 'em on your left hand or your right? You know 'em, we know 'em. Gold's description doesn't fit any local."

"Occasionally a new one comes up over the horizon, Will."

Gentry shook his head. "If this is one, then he's a new sun to all of us."

"Kennedy?"

"Doesn't mean a damn thing to me."

"It meant something to Gold. And this business of being interrupted while taping, taking time to stash the tape before answering a door buzzer. Okay, a guy is busy, he's interrupted, so he cuts off what he's doing,

maybe closes up a recorder, he'll pick up where he left off after his visitor departs. But Gold *hides* a tape, then answers his buzzer."

Gentry said nothing.

"And the killer doesn't tear up the joint looking for anything. He hits—bang—walks out."

Gentry listened to the tape. When it was finished, he said sourly, "Thanks for getting around to bringing it in, Mike."

"That's it?"

"It."

"Ride off on my own white horse, huh?"

"Roland McHenry the Second will pick up the tab, won't he?"

Friendship. Some days the well was deep—but not every day.

Shayne clomped downstairs. He yanked his hat brim low. He'd like to have some epithet painters by the scruffs of their scrawny necks. Indirectly, they'd already made it a bad day for him.

He stopped in at Records, spotted a couple of boys he knew. He waved one of them to him, dropped elbows on the counter, turned on casualness and a crooked grin. "Spencer," he said in greeting.

"Mike." The guy was already wary.

"You've got a package back there, probably has dust on it

by now. Kid named Thomas Dobson, a July suicide."

"Mike," said Spencer, "since when in hell did this become a public library?"

Shayne kept his grin. "So you read it, Spencer, and then tell me what it says."

Spencer hesitated, disappeared back into the files. He returned with a folder, put it on the counter before the detective. "I hope you read fast, Mike. I like office work, keeps a man off the streets on rainy days."

Young Dobson had died by his own hand. Cut all of the medical gibberish and it was a carbon monoxide poisoning, hose hooked to the exhaust of a sports heap, run into the interior of the car, windows closed. The boy had died.

The body had been discovered by one George Richard Fistler, an employee of the Arrow Patrol Service, during a routine check of the Dobson home. The Dobsons had gone to New York City. Before leaving, and in spite of the fact their son would be occupying the house during their absence, they had requested twice-a-day checks of the property. Arrow had complied, and it was during a morning check that the corpse had been found.

Fistler had been walking the grounds, had smelled the car-

bon monoxide seeping from the garage, opened up and found the boy. He had reported the death and remained on the scene until the cops arrived, quizzed him, then dismissed him.

No note had been found, but it was an out-and-out suicide. No reason to think otherwise. House untouched, boy unmarked, fully dressed, \$127 in his wallet. The death was a suicide, period!

One other little tidbit—young Dobson probably had been drunk when he had dutched. The medical examiner, upon investigation of the body, had found a residue of high alcoholic content.

Shayne deftly slipped a ten-dollar bill under the cover of the folder. Spencer watched the move without changing expression. "A round of beer for the boys after your trick is finished," said the detective and walked out of Records.

He lighted a fresh cigaret as he left the air-conditioned cool of the police building. Thomas Dobson's death bothered him. There were a couple of tenuous ties to the McHenry investigation. Young Dobson and young McHenry had been residents of Green Palms, close friends.

Now each was dead. Stan Gold had moved into a Green Palms clique in recent months,

a clique that included Rollie McHenry. Now God was dead too. But Gold had left a tape. On it, he had mentioned the Arrow Patrol Service.

Checked? he had asked on the tape.

What was to have been checked? And by whom?

Shayne got into his car. Arrow—the agency's name had cropped up in two seemingly unrelated reports, one a tape recording made by a mystery man, the other an official police investigation of a suicide.

Coincidence?

The detective started the Buick motor, reflexively gunned the engine twice while subconsciously listening for foreign clicks. He had a third link, too, as long as he was grasping for straws. Each boy could have been drunk when he died.

Shayne smoothly rolled the car from the police parking lot into the glut of street traffic, forcing one driver to swerve slightly. None of it had to tie in, of course. His suspicious mind could be working overtime.

He pointed the Buick toward his Flagler Street office. Roland McHenry II and his Margaret were due for a report. And Lucy Hamilton was due for his check-in. Hell, the Flagler Street building and office could have burned to the ground in

the last sixty hours. Shayne wouldn't know.

The office was intact. Lucy sat straight-spined at her desk, her fingers flying efficiently over the keys of the new electric typewriter. But Lucy shot a telling glance as Shayne swept into the office and expertly sailed his hat toward the old-fashioned clothes tree that stood in the far corner. The hat settled on a hook of the tree.

"A gentleman to see you, Michael," Lucy said crisply. "A Mr. Phillips."

Shayne turned and looked at the short row of waiting area chairs behind the office door. A man sat in one of the chairs. He was a large man and at ease. He sat with knees crossed, nattily dressed, black shoes glistening. His fingers were steeped under the point of his chin and a single diamond ring winked. There was a set smile on the man's face. He was quite black, with a small pecan-shaped scar halfway along his right jawline.

The man stood.

He was about six two in height, probably weighed 200 pounds. He wore a blue suit, a blue shirt, a white necktie. He looked as if he had dressed five minutes ago.

"Mr. Shayne?" he said pleasantly.

"Mr. Phillips?"

"I'd like to see you in private, if I may."

"You may."

VI

SHAYNE WENT AHEAD of Phillips into his private office. His strides were long but he was strategically setting the pace, too, and he discovered—to his relief—that Mr. Phillips was human after all. Phillips unconsciously moved swiftly behind the detective, crowding him close.

Shayne grabbed the edge of the door and slammed it back against Phillips. The black grunted surprise, but reeled only a couple of paces. Shayne whirled and lunged.

Phillips had a large gun in his right hand, a silencer in his left hand. Even while lunging, Shayne saw through the man's intent.

Phillips was unaware that Shayne had a description of him. He had walked into the office this morning, introduced himself to Lucy. When told Shayne had not yet arrived, he had casually seated himself and waited. Then with Shayne's arrival, he had requested privacy—still casual. While moving toward that target—with his body shielding his hands from Lucy—he had taken out the heater and the silencer,



was fitting them when Shayne slammed the door.

Had Shayne been unsuspecting, he probably would be dead now, a hole opened in his chest. Phillips would have cut him down as he had moved in behind his desk, then Phillips

would have calmly returned to the outer office and put a slug between Lucy Hamilton's surprised eyes.

But Shayne enjoyed an edge. He had recognized Phillips from Stanley Gold's description. And he had lured. While still in the outer office he could have gone for the .45 snug in the shoulder rig under his coat, but Phillips had been facing him. Phillips, in spite of feigned casualness, was trigger alert. He could have slapped down Shayne's gun hand, slammed Shayne off balance, shot a fist into the detective's middle, spit in the detective's eye. He could have made any number of moves that would have thwarted the detective.

Then, too, Lucy could have caught a stray bullet.

So, in accomodating Phillips' whim toward privacy, Shayne had won an edge. Each stride, although swift, had allowed him another second of thought, the formation of surprise attack. The strides brought a surprise weapon into range.

The door had become a weapon.

But Phillips was not a rookie. He did not attempt to recover instantly and retaliate in a flash of panic.

Rather, he continued to fade from the initial thrust of Shayne's onslaught. The gun

and the silencer had been flipped from his grips in the instant of surprise and pain as the door slammed against him, but even this loss did not plunge him into quicksand.

Phillips kept his cool.

He faded fast from Shayne's reaching hands. He managed to keep himself just barely out of range. And Shayne was now off balance, pitching forward.

Phillips brought a right knee up swiftly. It slammed into Shayne's body, bringing a grunt of pain. On the other hand, the jar of the knee kept his feet under him. He found himself suddenly within reaching distance of Phillips.

Two boxers squaring off inside a small ring is one thing. Two men squaring off anywhere else is another. Boxers, no matter how sloppy, show a semblance of professionalism. Untrained men do not. They seldom land a solid punch. They seldom punch. They scratch, claw, grip, clutch, gouge, grunt a lot. They yank hair, jerk ears, kick, flail with elbows, butt, curse.

Shayne excelled in the alley version of fisticuffs. So did the black who chose to call himself Phillips. It was a missed clutch by Shayne, a slip of a shoe toe, that put the detective in a precarious position once again. Phillips was behind the red-

head. He managed to ram a forearm across Shayne's throat and yank.

Shayne's Adam's apple tipped against the back of his throat. He gagged.

Phillips put his free arm against the back of Shayne's skull, jammed forward, Shayne felt as if in a vise.

Phillips cursed softly between the hisses of breathing as he attempted to snap Shayne's neck. And then suddenly there was an odd grunt from Phillips, and the pressure on Shayne's neck and throat eased immediately.

The redhead squirmed out of the grip, whirled. Phillips lay on the floor. He was writhing, both hands plastered against the top of his head.

Lucy Hamilton stood opposite Shayne, Phillips' gun in her hand. She gripped it by the muzzle. She was round-eyed, looked angrily determined.

"He was killing you, Michael," she breathed.

Shayne dropped on Phillips hard. He caught Phillips' right arm and yanked the wrist back to his spine. He moved the wrist up the spine until Phillips started making new noises.

"Stanley Gold!" snapped Shayne.

Phillips thrashed about like a beached shark.

Shayne applied pressure to

the wrist. This was where he had the advantage over Will Gentry. This was dirty hardnosed interrogation. A man could get hurt. The man knew it. It was simply a question of his pain threshold. How much could the guy take before he was forced to bleat?

Shayne dug deeper with his knee against Phillips' spine, moved the wrist another notch higher.

Phillips broke. S-shamus..." he wheezed, "I don't know no Gold."

"Last night! Executive Square Apartments!"

Phillips shook his head. Shayne put another half pound of pressure on the wrist. Phillips squirmed and rasped, "A job, man, that's all!"

"Today? Me?"

"Part of the—package! Hey, you're gonna break my arm!"

"Who paid?"

"Don't know!"

"How?"

"Parked heap—on the street. I lift up the hood like I got motor trouble. The bread is—there, taped on the air filter. Half."

"Half?"

"Half before—man. Half after. That was the contract."

"How much?"

"T-ten. Easy, huh? You're killing me!"

"Five thou to waste Gold.

Another five to put a hole in my hide?"

Phillips writhed. "I tell you—it was a package! I don't know no one—just descriptions, where to find you dudes!"

"Who gave you the descriptions?"

"Man, I can't tell you *that!* No way!"

There was a way. Shayne applied pressure to the wrist. A tiny snapping sound came from Phillips' shoulder. His body muscles became squirming snakes, and he moaned as he began to pound the floor with his free fist. Shayne kept the pressure on.

"Mr. Sage!" gasped Phillips. "I don't know him! Nobody does!"

"Where?"

"Diego!"

"San Diego?"

"Cal-i-forn-i-a—yeah, man, wha'cha think? Shayne, you're tearing—"

"I want Sage!"

"Don't know him, man, I tell yuh!" Phillips wheezed, writhing, pounding. "Diego, my scene. Mr. Sage knows me! I get a call from him every so often! There's a contract and a price, how I get the bread! If it's right, I take it, if it ain't, I don't! I never seen Mr. Sage in my life!"

"Way back," snarled Shayne. "Think way back, artist. You

and Sage, the original get-together."

"I—Shayne, you're killin'. Knew a guy in stir. He gave me a number. I got out, made a phone call. Before you ask, I don't remember the number. Wouldn't make no diff if I did. That number could get you a priest today!"

Shayne applied two more inches of pressure and Phillips' writhing took on new momentum. "So we get to the nitty gritty," the detective said savagely. "Where were you to find the bread this morning? Where's the parked heap with the bread?"

"Rent heap! Planetarium! South Miami Avenue!"

Shayne rose suddenly. "Call Will Gentry, Lucy," he said without looking at her. He reached down and clamped his hands on Phillips' meaty shoulders, wrestled him to his feet, shoved him into his private office. Shayne kicked the door shut behind him, took out the .45 and rammed the muzzle against Phillips's ear.

"Sit, pal," he growled. "And don't even wiggle a pinkie."

Gentry arrived with two patrol boys and two Homicide detectives. They swept in. With their arrival Phillips changed horses. Nursing the torn shoulder, rubbing it, lifting his arm in test every few seconds, he

suddenly wanted his rights read to him.

Rules applied now.

Shayne snorted.

But Phillips was a pro. He insisted. And then he became one of God's children. God's Roving Angels, that was the handle. Phillips was an Angel, spreading the Word. But spreading costs bread. Donations. That's all Phillips had been doing that bright Friday morning in late November in Miami.

He had been circulating among businessmen, the professionals—doctors, lawyers, private eyes, Indian chiefs. He was seeking donations. It was why he had been waiting for Mr. Shayne. His intent had been to tap Mr. Shayne for a little bread for God.

"The piece, Phillips," growled Gentry. "We've got the gun. Ballistics is gonna match it with the slug that tore Stanely Gold a new 'ole, made him dead."

Hell, he'd found the gun in an alley last night. He didn't know anything about guns or silencers or any kind of weaponry. All he was aware of was, some people paid money for guns. It had been his intent to take the gun to a hock shop, see how much it would bring for God. He simply hadn't got around to finding the shop yet.

It had been his goal after he received a donation from Mr. Shayne.

Which brought up a complaint Mr. Phillips had—especially since Mr. Gentry was the police chief in this city. Wasn't it part of Mr. Gentry's job—as chief—to protect the innocent from the violence of other men? Mr. Shayne had proven to be a very violent man.

He had attacked Mr. Phillips for no reason. He had injured Mr. Phillips. Mr. Phillips had a very numb shoulder at the moment, probably something torn loose inside. It was Mr. Shayne who had done the tearing. He wanted to file a complaint against Mr. Shayne. How did one go about doing a thing like that?

Phillips was hauled off to Gentry's jailhouse. He was deadpan as he departed. But he continued to nurse his shoulder.

Gentry sat hunched forward in front of Shayne's desk, his elbows planted on the arms of the chair. His face was dark, eyes glowing, the black cigar butt tipped precariously upward.

Shayne looped an arm up without turning in his chair and opened the drawer of a filing cabinet behind him. He took a half-filled bottle of Martell's from the drawer, removed

the cap, drank without offering the bottle to Gentry.

The police chief had his rules.

Shayne took a second drink, capped the bottle and returned it to the file never touched by Lucy Hamilton.

Gentry said flatly, "The stakeout at the planetarium is going to be wasted manpower. Nobody's going to show to pick up the car. The rental people will bleat in a day or two, and we'll know right where the wheels are—still with five thousand smacks taped to an air filter!"

Shayne shrugged. "Probably, but can you afford not to keep an eye on it?"

The cigar butt went even higher. Gentry glowered, then snapped, "You know damn well I can't! You ever hear of this guy, Sage?"

"Nope."

"Me neither. I hope Diego has."

"Somebody right here in Miami has. And middlemen like Sage aren't cheap. The package—Gold, me—cost a bundle, more than ten. Sage has to have a cut. You won't find Sage living in a government housing project, Will."

"The well is out in Green Palms, huh?"

Shayne lifted his hands. "Show me a school teacher, a shoe clerk, a factory worker, a

mechanic who could afford to—"

"Yeah, yeah," Gentry interrupted.

"And there *is* me," said Shayne significantly. "My tie is in Green Palms. I've been hired by a man who can afford to live in Green Palms to investigate the death of his son."

"Un-huh."

"So the way I see it now is, we're both in out there. I go in the front door—McHenry. You hit the back door—Gold. The McHenry thing is still out of your jurisdiction. It belongs to the Coast Guard—and to me. But the Gold hit is your baby. Gold had ties in Green Palms. So we each work from our respective doors. We'll meet in the middle. We usually do."

Gentry rose. His frown was deep. "Mike," he said, his tone suddenly soft, "where does the Dobson boy's suicide fit? Spencer brought me the file. I've gone over it. Green Palms residence—okay, a tie. Arrow Patrol Service, yeah, I picked that up. An Arrow man found young Dobson's body—Gold, on his tape, mentioned Arrow. Knot it for me."

Shayne almost grinned. "Tell Spencer he's had his last ten-spot from me."

Gentry snorted. "Those boys are beer drinkers, yeah. But they're cops first. Always cops first. That's eighty percent of

the reason they're on the force. And it isn't the last time you'll leave a tenspot in Records."

Shayne flicked the grin at the police chief, but it disappeared quickly. "So tell me, Will, you were being receptive earlier this morning. You damn near threw me out of your office. 'Charge off on your white horse, McHenry will pick up the tab'—remember? Some kids had painted dirty words on your nice white boat. A guy could get the idea that kind of thing wasn't supposed to happen to you, not to the big police chief of Miami, Florida.

"Goddamnit, Will, you weren't *listening* earlier! If you had, I'd be ten heavier. I know your boys. I knew Spencer would grab a phone the instant I was gone. But you needed to be alerted about young Dobson. His dutch might not fit, but right now it's a dangling thread out there!"

"See you around, Mike," Gentry said and walked out.

Seconds after Shayne heard the outer office door slam shut, Lucy Hamilton appeared. She leaned a shoulder against the jamb of the doorway, crossed one ankle over the other. She held a ten-dollar bill high between two fingers. She looked puzzled.

"This, Michael Shayne," she said, "has been a very interest-



ing morning. Not your usual secretary's day, I could say. Why did Will Gentry leave ten dollars with me? Has he retained you for some reason?"

The phone on Shayne's desk jangled. He swept it up against his ear. "Mike Shayne Investigations."

A pleasant male voice said, "Mr. Shayne?"

"Yeah."

"I have some information about the death of Roland McHenry the Third. Go to the Golden Triangle Municipal Golf Course. Be on the out-of-bounds marker right off the fifteenth fairway, halfway between tee and green, at exactly two o'clock. Be out in the open

where I can recognize you."

VII

A WARM SUN BATHED all of Miami that Friday afternoon. Mike Shayne perspired slightly as he took long strides along the rough out of bounds of the fairway. Far ahead and to his left, a lone golfer was hunched over on a glistening green. Behind, four more golfers had moved onto a tee. Shayne knew he was out of their driving range unless they were four Arnold Palmers with bad hooks.

He also realized he could be a target. He was totally exposed, well within range of a sniper's rifle. But two hit attempts in one day? By different croakers?

Still, he remained tuned. He was at what he considered to be the halfway point of the out-of-bounds area. The foursome behind him had moved off the tee. Ahead, the lone golfer dropped a club into a bag on a cart at the edge of the green and went through the motions of removing another.

Shayne narrowed on the single golfer. He could be removing a rifle. He could swing in the direction of the redhead, fire the necessary rounds and bolt.

But the golfer moved off toward the next tee, pulling the

cart behind him. Shayne sucked in a breath, a scowl corrugating his damp brow. He shoved his hat to the back of his head, glanced up at the thudding chopping sound of a helicopter that had come alive. He spotted the copter. It was a dark dot that had moved out of the sun and was whirring toward him swiftly, angling lower.

He looked for a non-golfer. No one in sight. Only the four golfers moving past near him, dragging their carts.

The sound of the copter grew louder. He watched it swoop in, hover, then settle to the long grass. The pilot waved to him from the bubble, and a door of the bubble popped open.

He wore a green-tinted business suit, a white shirt, a green polka-dot tie. The suit could have come from the rack of a department store. It was clean, pressed and fitted its wearer. The shirt could be Penney's, Sears, the necktie, a discount house offering, the shoes polished by amateur hands, probably on a lazy Saturday morning on a patio.

He looked about forty and wore a gold wedding band that looked as if it had been on its finger for years. He had sharp facial features in profile, steady efficient hands as he lifted the copter smoothly and soared off to the left.

Shayne glanced down on the four golfers who stood rooted on the fairway. The golfers and the ground dropped away swiftly. They sailed over the city, then Biscayne Bay until a strip of glistening island—Miami Beach—was beneath them.

The pilot glanced at Shayne. "I learned to handle one of these things in Korea a long time ago."

Shayne said nothing.

"My name is Kennedy." The pilot moved his right hand deep inside his suitcoat. Shayne was alert, primed to leap if the man withdrew a gun. But Kennedy took out a folded strip of worn leather, flipped it open, held it for the detective.

Kennedy was FBI.

"Stan Gold?" said Shayne.

"Undercover," Kennedy replied grimly. "You found Agent Gold dying, I understand."

Shayne gave the FBI man a sharp oblique glance. "There's only one way you could know that—you and Will Gentry."

Kennedy said, "I met Chief Gentry for the first time in my life about three hours ago."

"And I left him within the hour," countered Shayne. "He didn't mention you."

"Because I asked him not to," said Kennedy.

Prior to that Friday morning, the FBI had been conducting an investigation in Miami without

alerting the local police. The justification had been that their case was not developed enough to warrant additional forces. Too, with police involvement came news media and the successes the Bureau had had to date in its probe had been via undercover work. News stories could drive the FBI's quarry into deep holes.

But Agent Gold's murder had changed all that. The FBI had lost its undercover man and, with the discovery of a body in an apartment complex, Miami police had become involved. Kennedy's lone recourse had been to seek Gentry's cooperation. He was getting it. Gentry's people were to conduct a routine Homicide investigation. If one of his detectives stumbled across Gold's FBI tie, the lid was to be screwed down tight.

"I went the same from you, Shayne," Kennedy said. "I know how you're involved. Agent Gold gave me that after you quizzed him Wednesday afternoon about the McHenry boy's death."

Shayne ran a thumbnail along his jawline. "Something doesn't jibe, Kennedy," he said. "Gold pointed me to the tape."

Kennedy nodded. "For a reason. He had given you my name. He had talked to me about you. He didn't want police

to find the tape. If they did, if I didn't get to them in time, the discovery would get headlines. And that, in turn, might blow our investigation.

"Agent Gold figured that if you had the tape, you'd puzzle over it for a while. That'd give me time to get to you. What he didn't know, Shayne, was that, unlike most men in your business, you and Chief Gentry are friends and have a close working relationship."

"All of that is pretty heady thinking for a guy who's dying," grunted Shayne.

"Agent Gold kept his cool. That's why he was an undercover man, one of our best."

"Un-huh." Shayne shot the FBI man a hard look. "You know Gentry's got the hit man?"

Kennedy jerked slightly, returned the detective's look. "No, I didn't."

Shayne filled him in.

Kennedy started the copter into a wide U-turn. "Sage—San Diego." He seemed to taste the names. "We'll run an immediate check." Then he added, "Gold must have been close to something—and you must be, too."

"Well, if I am, I don't know what in hell it is," said the redhead. "I just got started on this case. Of course, it might help if I knew what you people

are after." He made no pretense of masking the sarcasm.

They were after payroll robbers. Three big jobs in the last year and a half. The first had occurred in the early morning of June 25th of the previous year—in Miami. An armored car had been delivering money from a main bank to three branch banks in the vicinity of a computer firm. It was payday at the computer company. The armored car's cargo did not arrive. It was lifted along the way.

The second job had been on November 29th, still last year, this one in California. An armored car carrying a military installation payroll to a base had been waylaid, its payroll whisked away.

Then on June 26th of the current year, in Chicago, an armored car taking money around to various branch banks for a routine business day was clipped.

Total take: around seven million dollars—cash.

The operation—the armored car is rolling, it's routine, everybody inside whistling an idle tune. Then a crazy driver brushes the truck. Just enough of an accident to make everyone stop.

But out of the car come five characters in scuba suits, goggles, the whole bit—plus

submachine-guns. The five pick up a pretty penny. No shooting, nobody hurt. They leap back into the car and drive off. Within thirty minutes the cops have the car. They also have a huge moving van. Both are parked on a side street near the robbery scene. Both are stolen vehicles. Two heavy planks are braced from the open rear of the van to the street. The inside of the van is empty. Except . . .

In two of the vans motor oil residue was found on the floor of the trailers. In the California job, a trace of a single tire mark was left. Speculation—small cars, getaway cars, were stashed in the vans—at least two cars, probably three. There were five robbers, so figure two to a car and one single. They drive down the plank ramp and away in different directions, each carrying a portion of the haul. They meet again at a designated point where the loot is stashed.

"Three cars diving out the rear end of a moving van and whizzing off is not your common street sight," said Shayne thoughtfully.

Kennedy shook his head. "We haven't turned up a smell of an eyewitness. The heat of the day has something to do with it, of course. On each job, the armored cars were hit between

three and four o'clock in the morning. These weren't hit-or-miss operations, Shayne. They were well-planned. These people play percentages."

"And only one job was pulled here in Miami," Shayne said significantly.

VIII

KENNEDY NODDED. But there were pointers. The California job first. A matchbook was found in the back of the stolen van. It was an almost full book, plenty of lights left, so it probably had not been thrown away but dropped from a pocket, unnoticed. Kicker—the book had come from the Ocean Room in Miami. The Ocean Room was a class place. The run-of-the-mill office worker didn't stop there—he or she couldn't afford it. The dirty beards didn't stop there—they couldn't get past the doorman.

The Chicago job—it was pulled late in June. Early in July, two one-hundred dollar bills from that heist showed up in a Miami bank. Serial numbers on the bills made the I.D. positive. And Shayne should be interested in another little wrinkle that came out of Chicago. Two of the armored car men swore by Holy Mary that one of the scuba-suited thieves was a woman—they

heard her give an order during the heist.

"Yeah," said Shayne, yanking an ear lobe. "Interesting, okay."

"But the real pointer, Shayne," Kennedy said flatly, "is a drawing. It's like a kindergarten drawing. A green palm tree, all green, done with dime store crayola on a sheet of common typing paper. In each of the robberies, an identical drawing has been handed to one of the armored car men."

Shayne snorted. "*Amateur night!*"

"Question," nodded Kennedy. "Does it eliminate pros?"

Shayne shrugged. "You could have some smart cookies offering red herrings, but smart cookies tighten oil pans, don't leave tire marks, don't carry matchbooks, know serial numbers are—"

"Exactly," interrupted Kennedy.

"The first job was pulled in Miami," the redhead went on. "In job two, a matchbook is found. Two bills from the Chi caper are spent here. Add the kid drawings and Miami's Green Palms area, an area stuffed with people who can afford to eat and drink in the Ocean Room.

"Yeah, Kennedy"—the detective nodded—"you've got a Miami flavor, okay. But you're also sniffing around a bunch of

people already heeled, who don't have to get tangled up in heists to—"

The redhead cut off the words and snapped his fingers abruptly: "Hold it," he breathed. "A few minutes ago, you said you people figure the robbers cut from the heist scenes in small cars. And you also figure they don't tailgate down the highway, one, two, three. They split. Later to meet and stash the haul. That is the word you used, isn't it, Kennedy—*stash*?"

"Other than the two bills that turned up in banks here, we haven't seen a dime from any of the hauls," said the FBI man.

"It's been—what? Roughly eighteen months since the first caper," Shayne continued, "and you're dealing with five people. That's five temperaments, five nervous systems, five—"

"You've got it, Shayne." Kennedy interrupted again. "If these jobs had been pulled by a singleton, even two guys, okay. A singleton can sit, two boys with a blood pact between them can sit. But *five* people can sit? I don't think so. Somebody, sooner or later, will break. Someone will start living high on his cut. And then we'd have him.

"On the other hand, how about if we're dealing with five

people who don't worry about tomorrow's dollar? The legitimate dollar. It's already there. These five could die today and the dollar still would come in tomorrow. If we're dealing with that kind—"

"It gives you amateur night in Green Palms. Yeah, it *could* be," said Shayne. "Somebody out for kicks. The drawing gives them chuckles."

"Thrill seekers," Kennedy nodded.

"It's the caper, not the take. Who gives a damn about the take? That's how you've been playing it?"

"Until last night," Kennedy said. "But Agent Gold being wasted—and by an out-of-town professional—changes the color scheme."

"Sitting on seven million bucks, even if you're already heeled, can change a lot of things, Kennedy. But you don't go to the supermarket and buy a Phillips either. Nor do you run an ad in a newspaper that says, *WANTED—Professional killer*. You *know* somebody. In your Green Palms sniffing, you guys haven't run into any hidden mob ties, have you?"

"You *know* we haven't," Kennedy said. "Come *on*, Shayne, I didn't get you up here to play Stupid Questions. If we were dealing with the Syndicate, there wouldn't be



any seven-million-dollar stash somewhere, nor would I be puzzled by Gold's death at the hand of a professional hit man."

"Well, *somebody* knew how to contact Phillips."

Kennedy was frowning. "We've run extensive checks on every resident of the Green Palms area," he said. "It's been tedious, and we've turned up some interesting items about

some of them—but nothing to link any of them to the underworld."

Shayne thumbed his jawline. "Gold was your legman."

"Supposedly the son of a New Hampshire industrialist who moved down here to get away from papa. It was a mutual agreement between father and son."

"He spread that word around?"

"Yes." Kennedy nodded. "He's been covered in New Hampshire. It's been a solid cover."

"Any checks made on him?"

"Yes. By Sally Wooten—or on behalf of Ms. Wooten. She didn't personally make the inquiry. But we know she had one made."

Shayne lifted an inquiring eyebrow at the FBI man.

"We think we're onto something with her," Kennedy said. "She could be our woman in the scuba suit. Unlikely, sure. After all, she's the daughter of an ambassador. But she travels a lot. She often turns up in foreign countries. We've circulated her picture in various banks around the world."

"Interestingly, she has been recognized in some of the banks, but not always under the name Wooten. She has several safety-deposit boxes, and she continues to acquire new ones. She could be gradually

salting seven million dollars, or all of those boxes could contain legitimate cash."

"Ms. Wooten inherited a fortune from a grandfather. She has invested, and she is smart, has been lucky or has a sharp business manager, probably all three. Anyway, those investments have paid off, are paying off. She has a steady flow of big money coming in. She could be salting it overseas for tax purposes or other whims."

"But Gold was concentrating on her," Shayne pressed.

"Yes," said Kennedy. "As you now know, he managed to work into a crowd of young people who've been running with Ms. Wooten in recent months. It gave him a door to her."

"Any of those people high on your suspect list?"

Kennedy's frown deepened. "All of them, and none of them, Shayne. That's where we are in our investigation. Ms. Wooten is a prime suspect at the moment. But we need five people, so her associations—especially her male associations—have been drawing special attention."

"And?"

"Door is suddenly closed," said Kennedy. "Agent Gold is dead. I still have Ms. Wooten. I don't have anyone else. Are you willing to pick it up for us?"

The detective stared hard at

the FBI man, but all he got was a sharp line profile as Kennedy seemed to be concentrating on piloting the helicopter.

Then Kennedy said, "You have been hired by Roland McHenry to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of his son. It is common knowledge in the Green Palms neighborhood. It gives you an 'in' to Ms. Wooten and to anyone else who resides in Green Palms or who knew the McHenry boy. All I'm suggesting is a dual role on your part. As you ask questions about young McHenry, you might also slip in one or two stingers relating to the armored car robberies."

"You're beautiful, Kennedy!"

"Agent God was proficient at recording on tape. He went to a laundry at least twice a week. We still have a man there who—"

"Forget it," growled Shayne. "I don't have time to sit around tape recording."

"All right." Kennedy nodded. "You can call International Airport, ask for Marie on Extension seventy-four. The line will be open any hour of the day or night. I'd like to get daily reports, so how about calling around eleven each night?"

"No good," said Shayne, shaking his head. "I never know where I'm going to be,

what I'll be doing. I could be in a fight or something. I don't take breaks, Kennedy, not when I'm rolling. You keep your people on that phone and I'll get to them when I can. That's the best I can promise."

IX

IT WAS ALMOST three-thirty in the golden afternoon when Mike Shayne moved back across the municipal golf course toward the clubhouse. Kennedy had chugged off into the sky and disappeared.

The detective spotted a public phone on an outside wall of the clubhouse and used it. Other than a call from Bubba Ring, Lucy Hamilton had had a routine afternoon at the Flagler Street office. Bubba had left a phone number.

"Lock up for the day, Lucy," Shayne said. "I'm heading out to Green Palms. I won't be in again."

He put the phone together, then dialed Bubba Ring.

"Shayne, man!" Bubba laughed low in his huge chest, became serious. "Been sniffin', baby, and got you a cat. Maybe. California dude, Diego. Has two hitches in the slammer for rough stuff. He's supposed to do his thing from a joint called the Odd Pair, a tooty-fruity house, only this cat ain't."

"He likes to hang there, nobody gives him trouble. Could be your man, ain't sayin' he is, ain't sayin' he ain't. But this one is ice, baby, very icy. Does this work fast and clean. And he's been seen in our town last couple of days. Got a scar, too—on his jaw."

"You've got a good nose, Bubba."

He laughed. "I got more than that, Shayne. I still know how to twist an arm or two. I ain't forgot everything, man!"

Shayne put the phone together without telling Bubba Ring that Will Gentry already had the hit man. It would only call for explanation. He tucked the information about the prison terms and the place called the Odd Pair in his memory for Kennedy and moved swiftly to his car.

The Green Palms area gleamed in the late afternoon sunshine. The detective turned the car into a horseshoe drive that curved far back from the street to a long, low mansion. The Wooten place was quiet. Shayne left the Buick and looked around. No one in sight, no other cars. He stared at the house. Was it an oversized vault? He went up to the front door and stuck out a finger. Two minutes later he was still punching the door buzzer. Nothing.

Frowning, he returned to the Buick and rolled down the drive to the street. He kept an eye on the rear view mirror, watching for any kind of movement back at the mansion, someone who might surreptitiously be watching him. But there was no movement.

He turned into the street. His hands worked reflexively against the steering wheel, and his craggy face was pulled down in deep thought. Some of the things Kennedy had passed along were triggering a fresh approach to the problem of young Rollie McHenry's death. He didn't like the door Kennedy had opened, but he couldn't ignore it either.

The bright yellow car seemed to come from nowhere to appear in his mirror. He cocked an eye and slowed. The yellow car dropped back. Shayne gradually applied pressure to the accelerator. The yellow Maserati maintained its distance behind him. The driver was male and alone, but that was all the detective could make out.

Shayne suddenly stomped hard on the accelerator and the Buick leaped forward with a surge of power, rear tires peeling. He grunted satisfaction as the Maserati dropped away swiftly. He had surprised the driver.

Shayne spotted an intersec-

tion ahead. He swung into the turn at a high rate of speed, then swung into the curbing and braked hard. He rolled from the car and was waiting when the Maserati whipped around the corner.

The yellow car went into a dodging little dance when the driver again found himself caught by surprise. But the braking reaction came too late. The car was already too far into the sidestreet for the driver to back off. He fed power to the Maserati and it roared past the redhead. Frank Danforth was curved over the steering wheel. He kept his eyes straight ahead as he whipped past.

Shayne stood scowling. Danforth had picked him up as he wheeled from the Wooten place. Had it been accidental or had the youth been watching the house? If he had been posted, why?

Shayne got into the Buick and made a U-turn, returned to the main street and rolled toward the Coulter residence. It was a pretentious white structure, placed as if by sliderule on an acre of greenery. He saw the yellow Maserati flash along the street as he left the Buick and was tempted to chase down Frank Danforth for a nose-to-nose, but the pregnant Barbara Coulter came from the house.

She was a cute girl, small

and dark in coloring. She wore her black hair short and looked healthy in a pink playsuit. There seemed to be a touch of plumpness about her, but the pregnancy had yet to become obvious. Only the emotional strain showed. It was mirrored in her eyes, in the slight corrugation across her brow. Death had rocked her. Pregnancy was temporary, death was not.

"M-Mr. Shayne . . ." she faltered, "I saw you drive in. I thought it was mother returning from the hairdresser, then I . . . Mr. Shayne, have you heard about Stan Gold? He was murdered last night!"

She shuffled around in the sunshine, seemed unsure about what to do with her hands. Her face muscles had tightened. Abruptly, she looked straight at the detective, her eyes round and pleading for some kind of relief from her emotional torture.

"Mr. Shayne, who killed Stan? Why? Why would anyone—anyone . . . Oh, Mr. Shayne, first Rollie and now Stan!"

"And before Rollie, Thomas Dobson," the redhead said.

Barbara Coulter jerked.

"Rollie and Thomas were friends, I understand," said Shayne.

"Yes! But—"

"And there is Frank

Danforth—Rollie, Thomas and Frank."

"Well, yes! But Mr. Shayne, are you trying to tell me something?"

"No," he said truthfully. "But I *would* like to know a little more about the three boys. Did they ever travel together? I mean, out of the city. Say, to California. Did they ever take a trip to California?"

"Yes." She nodded, still wide-eyed. "In November last year. They left the morning of November twenty-sixth."

"You have a reason to remember to exact date?"

"No. But I do because—well, the only reason I remember is because Stan Gold last week ask me almost the same question. Only Stan ask me to be specific. I went to my diary. Yes, I'm twenty-two years of age and I keep a diary! It's old-fashioned, perhaps, but I like to look back, remember things."

"How long were the boys gone?"

"A week."

"Rollie tell you what they did in California, where they went?"

"They cruised. It's what they always do on trips. They took the two cars, Rollie's and Frank's, changed off driving and riding together, and cruised."

"Why didn't you go along?"

"My parents wouldn't let me."

"No one went with them, I guess."

Barbara Coulter frowned deeply. "No." She shuffled again. "I don't understand, Mr. Shayne. You're asking almost the same questions Stan asked and—"

"How close are you to Sally Wootten, Barbara?" the detective interrupted.

"I'm not. Sally is—older and—well, I don't particularly care for her. Before you ask, too, no—to my knowledge, Sally wasn't in California with the boys. She spent Thanksgiving week and the following week in Honolulu. I don't understand any of this, Mr. Shayne. Why are you asking these questions, why did Stan ask—"

"I thought she and Frank might have made arrangements to meet somewhere in—"

"Rollie would have *told* me!"

Shayne nodded, used a finger and thumb to tug his earlobe. Then he asked bluntly, "How about Chicago, this year in June? Did the boys—"

"Yes! And again I remember because Stan asked the same thing! Mr. Shayne, I demand to know why you are—"

"Then Thomas Dobson committed suicide in July, just a few weeks after returning from Chicago."

"It was eighteen days later, if you must be exact!"

"This questioning by Gold—have you discussed it with your friends? With Etta Sales, Frank, Ms. Woo—"

"Goodbye, Mr. Shayne! And don't bother to return here! If you do—if you do . . ." She suddenly stabbed the air, pointing over the detective's shoulder. "If you do, I'll tell *them* about you!"

Shayne eyed the street, watched a tan, medium-priced sedan cruise slowly past the house. Identification was painted on the door of the sedan in blue letters—ARROW PATROL SERVICE, INC.

Barbara Coulter went into the house and slammed the door firmly behind her.

Shayne got into the Buick, lighted a cigaret. He pulled deeply on it, then backed down to the street. There was nothing in sight—no patrol car, no yellow Maserati braked against the curbing far down the street somewhere. He drove next door. Etta Sales was already coming from the house, across the front lawn. Shayne braked immediately after turning into the driveway, then backed again, parked along the curbing. Etta Sales came to the curb in front of the Buick and plunked herself down.

"I'd like a cigaret, too," she



said as the detective joined her. "Sit."

He lighted the cigaret for her, sat beside her, hooked elbows on his knees and stared off into space as he waited for her.

She was a heavy girl in cutoff jeans and a faded university sweatshirt with the number 66 front and back. She had stringy, corn-colored hair and still wore tiny mementoes of acne. She also was barefoot, her nails painted a brilliant red.

"Not much to look at, huh, Mr. Shayne?" she said without looking at him. She smoked, exhaled noisily. "But I'm rich.

Father owns a whole bunch of apparel shops, all across the South. I've got five brothers and four sisters, my father hasn't always been away from home on business—but there's plenty of money to go around."

"You told me the other day, Etta," said Shayne.

"Yeah, I did, didn't I? Okay, so my insecurity is showing."

"Barbara called."

"You probably hadn't even started the motor of your heap before she was on the horn. Incidentally, that isn't a bad-looking set of wheels. Got powder?"

"Plenty of power, Etta."

"So does my baby Caddy."

"Stan Gold."

"Murdered." She smoked, shook her head. "I can't dig it yet, Shayne. I keep thinking I'm going to wake up later and find out this morning was a bad dream. But I know it won't happen. That's because the cops have already been here. Which, in turn, is why I came out here to the curb. Papa is in Georgia, looking after some of the stores, but Mama is in the house, and Mama doesn't dig cops, doesn't dig people coming around asking her darling Etta about a guy who was shot down and killed, even a guy like Stan Gold—whom Mama liked."

"Shayne, level with the girl. Who the hell killed Staniey?"

Why was he murdered? I liked the guy. He's only the second guy I can remember who liked my body and not Papa's money, but, more important, we pillow-talked good. We didn't lie to one another. Oh, yeah, I know Stanely had another side to him, one he wouldn't discuss. But he didn't lie to me about it, he just wouldn't discuss it.

"I like to think it was side of him that was mudered—but, goddammit, Shayne, when the sonofabitch killed *that* side of Stanley, he killed *my* side, too! You dig?"

"I dig, Etta," the redhead said. He flipped away the butt of his cigaret, lighted a fresh one. She held out two fingers. He put a cigaret between them, watched her light it from the butt in her left hand.

"But I'm not going to tell you anything about Stan Gold," said Shayne. "I'm going to ask questions, and I want straight answers. Then, when all of this is finished, we've got a date. Right here on the curbing, unless you prefer some snazzy place—like the Ocean Room. Okay?"

She smoked, continued to look off into the distance, but it seemed to the detective that she almost smiled. "Shayne," she finally said softly, "I'm opting for the Ocean Room, me in my cutoffs and you in that

sloppy suit, with the gun still strapped to your chest. I have a hunch we'd make it. I have a bunch you'd see to it that we did make it inside, even if we hit the door naked! I think that'd be fun. I'd like to see the doorman's face."

She paused, smoked, then added, "Stanley had a gun, too, you know. I saw it. It was in a drawer in his dresser. It was in a holster, and there were straps wrapped around the holster. I don't think I was supposed to be looking in that drawer, but I did once while he was shaving.

"We had finished showering, I liked the stubble on his face while we were showering. He used to rub me with it. I liked that. But I made him shave that night because we were going out later. Ah, hell, Shayne, I didn't make him shave. He was going to shave anyway. He was that kind of guy!"

"Okay, you're not going to tell me about him?" She shrugged. "So I wait. So ask your questions. Ask about the Ocean Room. Stanley did."

Shayne asked his questions. But he got no more than confirmation of what Barbara Coulter already had relayed to him.

Then Etta Sales added reflectively while chain-smoking a fourth bummed cigaret, "You know, Shayne, I'm glad you

came around this afternoon. Barbara gave me a few moments of the willies when she called, but now I'm glad you're here, asking your questions. That 'other' side of Stanley—the side with the gun—still bothers me, but I'm not afraid of what I'll find out now. I think I'm going to miss him more than ever."

"You are, Miss Sales," Shayne agreed.

He stood up, hitched his trousers, walked to the car door. As he swung it open, he found Etta still seated on the curb, a wan smile on her face.

"Thanks, Shayne," she said. "Compassion isn't exactly your bag, is it?"

A tan sedan came down the street from the opposite direction, rolled slowly, stopped opposite Etta Sales. The driver was alone in the sedan. He poked a round face out of the open window of the door with the Arrow Patrol Service, Inc. marking, shot a glance at Shayne, then looked at the girl.

"Everything all right, Miss Sales?"

"Yes, yes, George," she replied.

The tan car drifted off. The driver was redhead, like the detective, with a bit more gold in the red. And the hair was fluffy over his ears, curled like a duck bump at the back of his neck.

He looked forty and—seated behind the steering wheel—as if he might be short and lumpy of body.

Shayne held up two closed fingers for Etta Sales. "You and a security man? Like?" He wiggled the fingers and cocked a shaggy brow.

She grinned suddenly, got up. She was blocky in the cutoff jeans and the sweatshirt. "When you keep late hours, you get to know the security people," she said. "Don't forget our date."

X

SHAYNE RETURNED TO the Wooten place but again failed to bring anyone to the front door. When he went back to his car, he saw the tan security car enter the driveway. He waited. The driver braked beside him. Shayne braced his palms against the door of the car.

"George," he said through the open window.

The driver glanced down at Shayne's hands and pinked. Shayne had a decided advantage. Either George had to force the detective to stand straight or he had to scramble across the front seat to leave the sedan.

He decided to say right where he was. "Shayne," he said in a voice an edge above gruffness.

"It's George . . . ?" Shayne let it hang.

"Fistler. What are you doing here? Ms. Wooten isn't home."

"Where is she?"

"I saw her drive away. That's all I know. Buzz off."

"You're pretty damn good at your work, George."

"It's what I get paid for, shamus. Get the hell off this property. And while you're at it, keep on rolling out of this area. You've been all over Green Palms the last couple of hours. It isn't your kind of turf."

"It is when I'm investigating a murder, pal."

"You mean that Gold killing last night? It didn't happen out here."

"I mean the murder of Rollie McHenry the Third," said the redhead.

He strode to the Buick, got inside and rolled out to the street. He was a block away from the Wooten house before the tan sedan showed in his rear-view mirror. George Fistler came fast, then found a spot behind the Buick and held it.

Shayne turned into the Danforth residence. He did not spot a yellow Maserati. A thin, pleasant-looking woman, expensively attired in a casual pants suit and wearing sparkling rings on the fingers of both hands, opened the door to him.

She did not know the whereabouts of her son, Frank, this bright afternoon.

A mother's worry was immediately alive in her eyes.

George Fistler was waiting a half-block away and the tan sedan remained in Shayne's mirror until he drove out of the Green Palms neighborhood. The detective turned onto a busy avenue and the security man made a U-turn.

Fistler had a chip on his shoulder. He had bird-dogged without even making a pretense at covering. Why?

Shayne spotted a small bar, went inside. He savored a Martell with an ice-water chaser, then slid into a phone booth where he called the Arrow Patrol Service. He got a man with a high-pitched voice.

Shayne told the man he was looking for a George Fistler, a friend from yesteryear. Shayne said he was in town for just a few days and remembered that his old buddy, George Fistler, was in Miami, working for a security outfit. He'd been going through the Yellow Pages, checking with security people. There were too many Fistlers on the White Pages.

The redhead got an address and a phone number for George Fistler and then the high-pitched voice volunteered, "George just got off the run.

He's working the day trick this week, so he just got off. You probably can find him at the White Onion, it's a beer joint on forty-ninth. He usually goes there from here."

But the hairless bartender at the White Onion had not seen George Fistler, and probably wouldn't. It was after six o'clock. Fistler always showed between five and six. If he wasn't in by six, it was unlikely he would show. That was Fistler's habit.

Fistler lived on the second floor of a medium-priced apartment building in a medium-priced neighborhood. He finally opened the door to Shayne's buzz. He was wet all over and he had a large bathtowel wrapped around his naked loins, knotted over a lumpy hip. Shayne heard shower water still running somewhere in back of the apartment.

He gave Shayne a hard look. "What do you want? I'm going out this evening, do you mind?"

He started to push the door shut, but Shayne banged it open with a flat hand. "How come the bird-dog, George? You were on me hard this afternoon. Too hard."

Fistler scowled. "I always tail strangers cruising my area, shamus, and Green Palms is my area."

"Un-huh," said Shayne. He moved into the apartment. Fistler gave ground reluctantly.

"Shayne," he said, "I'm in the middle of a shower, got places to go, things to do. Buzz off—okay?"

"A couple of people out in Green Palms I want a line on, George. Those people being your business and you being such a dedicated guy—"

"I keep my yap shut," Fistler interrupted, bristling again. "It's what I get paid for, protecting those people and keeping my yap shut about them. They get privacy. Part of that package is, I don't talk about them."

"A couple of your people died recently, George."

"Hey, shamus!" Fistler lifted both arms in exasperation, turned and padded to an open doorway. He whirled. His eyes were hard, his mouth a thin line. Then he seemed to soften a little. He said, "People always die, Shayne. Even Green Palms people. Having a pad out there doesn't give a guy immunity from death, you know."

"Young Dobson and young McHenry."

"The kids? Yeah, they're dead. Dobson dutched and McHenry went over the side of a boat. Incidentally, what was that jazz you gave me this afternoon? You got the idea

McHenry was murdered? Man, you're far out!"

"Dobson," said Shayne. "I understand you found his body."

"I did. So? It was routine. The Dobsons were out of the city. We got a special request from Old Man Dobson to keep an eye on the house, even though the boy remained at home. Okay, I was checking the place out that morning, walking around the grounds. Looking at the windows and doors, and then I smelled the stuff coming from the garage, busted it open and found the kid. Beat it, Shayne. I've got no more to say to you, and I'm already gonna be late for my date."

He disappeared into a bedroom behind him, closed the door. Shayne waited a moment, then left the apartment. His steps were heavy as he went down the flight of stairway to the ground floor. Outside, the sun was down, evening was graying fast. Evening came early in November.

He drove around the block, then parked up the street from the apartment building. From this vantage he could see who went in and out of the building. George Fistler bothered him. Fistler had known his name that afternoon, had known he was a private detective, had recognized him.

Someone in Green Palms obviously had sicked Fistler on him. Maybe Fistler's date was with that person.

It was eight-thirty and dark when George Fistler left the building a half-block away, got into the Volkswagen and moved out into the traffic. He used almost 45 minutes to cross the city and enter a fringe business area that was beginning to go to weed.

Abruptly, he whipped into the entry of a small and ill-lighted motel. He had caught Shayne short, forced him to roll on past the motel. But Fistler didn't stop at the motel office. The Volks disappeared around a corner of the units.

Shayne braked at the curb, let the motor idle as he stared back at the yellow lights. He waited for the Volks to reappear, roll off in the opposite direction. Fistler didn't show.

Shayne left the Buick, a frown creasing his brow. He walked swiftly to the motel, walked around to the rear of the units without going near the office. There was another row of units, three shadowed cars parked far apart, two more braked side by side. The detective spotted the outline of the Volkswagen against a long sedan that held a sheen even in the heavy shadows.

He became tuned to every

sound and movement as he eased toward the Volks. The blare of a television commercial erupted from one of the units, and he saw the profile of a shirtless fat man behind the thin drape of another. He moved into a position from which he could study the unit fronting the Volks and the long sedan. Light came from a window and this drape, too, was thin, but there no shadows moved behind the drape.

Shayne edged cautiously to the unit door and listened. He heard voices, a male and then a female, but could not make out the words. He took a deep breath, opened his jacket to afford quick access to the .45, then knocked on the door hard.

Silence followed. Finally the door was jerked open and George Fistler—coat off and necktie pulled down—was staring at him.

Shayne moved fast. He yanked the door from Fistler's hand and stepped inside, forcing Fistler back. A woman sitting up in a sagging bed yelped and jumped out of it in a flash of bare legs.

"Goddam, shamus!" Fistler snarled.

Shayne cut him off with a wave of his hand. He studied the woman. She was a mild surprise. He had thought he might find George Fistler and

Sally Wooten together. But this woman was forty to fifty in years, tall, thin, her body pampered.

But her age showed in the backs of her hands and in the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. Glistening black hair, piled high on her head, was a bit askew. Rings flashed from her fingers and her eyes held an edge of glassiness.

The woman was frightened, but her glassy stare was not all fear. Shayne sniffed hard. Marijuana.

"Get out, Marie," George Fistler said.

She stood rooted until Shayne stepped out of her path. "Okay, lady," he said, pushing his hat to the back of his skull.

She made a wide circle around the detective, straightening her black wig reflexively. Then she danced out the door, not bothering to close it. A few seconds later, the motor of the long sedan roared and she was gone.

Fistler snarled, "Okay, Shayne, so you broke up a little party. Kicks for you?"

Shayne said, "You let me trail you here. How come?"

"Let?" Fistler looked surprised. "Shayne, look." He made it sound like a plea for understanding from a child.

"I didn't let nothing, man. You *followed* me here. That's

pretty damn plain, okay, but I didn't *let*. I wasn't paying no attention to what was behind me on the way here. No need to. Her old man is out of the country, will be for another week.

"So she's a bored housewife from Green Palms, and she likes grass. The grass is *her* bag, not *mine*. She floats out here occasionally and fires up for the night, but she also likes company. That's me. I'm the company. She lets me know ahead of time. She—"

A pause, then, "Hey, I don't hafta explain nothing to you, man! What the hell am I doing?"

He went to the door, held it wide. "This way out, Shayne!" It was almost a yell.

Shayne debated. It smelled. But he could stand there staring at George Fistler all night, get nothing more than additional anger and yelling. Chasing down Fistler for the moment was a dud.

He yanked his hat down, walked past Fistler and out the door.

Yells!

The thought hit Shayne hard as the shadow materialized from behind the Volks. He went into the flat dive to his left, his right hand flashing to the butt of the .45 while he was still in flight. He landed hard as the sound of the first shot filled his

ears. The slug splattered against the wall behind him and to his right.

There were three more shots before he leveled the .45 and shot upward. The shadow howled and went into a crazy spin, rolling away from both the Volks and the detective.

Shayne moved around the front of the Volks on hands and knees, scrambling. He pounced hard on the downed shadow, which writhed and moaned in his grip. Then he dropped a forearm across the shadow's throat and looked for George Fistler.

Fistler already was fifty yards away and moving fast.

"Freeze!" shouted the detective, leveling the gun.

Fistler went around a corner of the motel units and disappeared. Shayne cursed and shoved up on his knees.

Noise burgeoned—chatter, a cautious yell here and there. Then there was movement. People, attracted by the sound of the shots, were beginning to stir.

Shayne caught the clothing of his captive under him and yanked him toward the light of the door. Frank Danforth's head lolled in the light. His eyes were closed, his mouth sagged. He was out cold. But he was breathing. He had a shoulder wound.

XI

SHAYNE FED POWER to the Buick. The Green Palms area was again his target. He had bolted the shooting scene. People had begun to move in on him. Next would be the cops. He didn't have time for either—a murderer was loose.

So he'd bolted.

His driving was instinctive and reflexive. He sat bent over the steering wheel, a cigaret dangling from the right corner of his lips as he fitted together pieces of the green Palms puzzle.

There were still missing pieces, but most of it went together. Thus assembled, the many Green Palms happenings of the past five months comprised a sinister package. Three deaths—Thomas Dobson, Roland McHenry III, Stanley Gold—formed a tricorn of murder.

His own death was to have squared the triangle. He had been lured to the motel by George Fistler. Frank Danforth was to be the killer. But young Danforth was unskilled. He had fired four shots, only the first slug coming close. The clumsy attempt was a product of frustration and desperation.

Phillips, a hired gun, had failed and panic had surfaced in Green Palms. With his ques-

tioning of the Coulter and Sales girls that afternoon, his two stops at the Wooten house with a nervous Frank Danforth and George Fistler watching, desperation had come alive. A spur-of-the-moment plot had been devised and Fistler had set himself up as fishbait.

Why?

Shayne thought he had the answer. He'd find out within the next half hour.

At the Wooten place, light showed in all the windows but he saw no cars and no one moving around inside the house. He discovered why when he lifted a stiff finger to punch the door buzzer. The door opened before his finger touched the button, and Sally Wooten stood in the opening, a set smile on her weathered face.

She wore faded bluejeans and tennis shoes, a baggy cloth top, a choker of shark's teeth, and she held a gun in her right hand. The muzzle of the gun was pointed straight at Shayne's middle. It did not waver.

She glanced beyond him and nodded with satisfaction. "Come in, Shayne," she said. "We've been waiting, and I must say"—she chuckled without humor—"your Lone Ranger style is paying off."

He was ushered deep into the baronial splendor of the house.

Sally Wooten kept distance between them.

Shayne knew two things. One, someone else—probably George Fistler—was somewhere in the house. Fistler either had grabbed a cab when he bolted from the motel or he'd had his own car stashed on a nearby sidestreet. The Volkswagen left at the motel would turn out to be a stolen heap.

Two, Sally Wooten was a cool and crafty woman. She looked for odds and she played them. A few days earlier, a private eye had loomed out of nowhere and moved inside her lair. Immediately she had launched her own private investigation. She had made herself familiar with the eye's habits, one in particular. When the eye was moving on a case, he didn't stop to pick up reinforcements.

Such as cops.

Sally Wooten had used those odds tonight. Following the motel fiasco, she had been waiting for the eye to show. The odds-on bet with herself had been that the eye would arrive at her door without cops.

Shayne had the definite feeling he had entered another trap.

Sally Wooten pointed him through an open doorway and into a huge library. A few paces inside he stopped and looked around. He found Fistler to his

left and behind him. Fistler sat tense in a high-backed armchair. He nervously fondled a submachine-gun.

"No cops?" he said.

"Be cool, baby," Sally Wooten purred. "Doesn't mama always take care of you? I told you—Mr. Detective here is a loner."

"The heat! Did you get his heat? It's in a rig under—"

Fistler cut off his words as Shayne moved his right hand up to his chest. The detective saw Fistler's fingers tighten on the submachine-gun, and he became a statue as he measured the man. Fistler was on edge. He didn't look at home with the chopper. But he also was too many steps away, he'd get the snout of the chopper around in time to cut up a lunging body.

"Go ahead, Shayne," Sally Wooten said in a voice that was ice. "Remove the gun, lay it on the table, but be very careful."

She, too, remained out of range. She could blast him before he got one foot planted. He took the .45 from the shoulder holster and put it on a polished lamp table.

"Are we going sailing tonight, doll?" he asked.

The set smile went crooked again. Brittle eyes glowed with confidence. "I hope you fancy yourself a strong swimmer," she said. "In my vivid imagina-

tion, I see you as a man who doesn't go down without a fight. I think it appropriate that you should suffer a little. You've been raising enough hell with me the last few days."

"Like Gold before me, huh?"

The smile wavered. "He asked too many questions in too many places, but he wasn't a snooper with a license! That much I *do* know! Just irritating, like the persistent fly on a rainy day!"

"You bring in a hit man to swat a fly?"

She shot Fistler a hard glance. "That was a mistake!"

Fistler said, "God dammit, Gold was prying, and what did we know about him? And then *this* bastard shamus shows! Who had time to set up two more—"

"Shut up, George."

"From the top," Shayne said, "just to see how really close I am." He didn't wait for Sally Wooten to give an okay. He continued, "Green Palms, good living, but even good living can't always stem boredom. Sometimes it *fuels* boredom. So a sharp gal comes up with a wild idea—how about knocking off a payroll truck? Not for the bread. Hell, no, who in Green Palms needs bread? We do this, gang, simply for kicks!"

"Sharp gal finds takers—Rollie McHenry, Thomas Dob-

son, Frank Danforth. But there's an immediate problem. Nobody in Green Palms knows anything about payroll trucks. On the other hand, there's a security force in Green Palms and security people might know about payroll trucks. So all sharp gal has to do is nose a little, test the waters, so to speak, find a dude who knows something about how payroll money is moved and is not above a little larceny.

"Right man is found. Name's George Fistler. Maybe George was on industrial security before residential, or maybe George has a security force pal in industrial who gets a loose mouth over a beer. *How* George knows about payrolls isn't important.

"He knows, he's not allergic to stickups, he points. And an armored car hauling bread to branch banks that cash payroll checks from a Miami computer firm is knocked off. Caper goes smooth as silk, complete with leaving a child's drawing of a green palm. *Funsicle!* Laughs all the way back to the comfortable houses.

"And then inside one of those comfortable houses—*this* house—a meeting of the minds. The Miami caper was so much fun, let's do another! So, with instructions from George Fistler about what to look for,

sharp gal takes a few trips around the country, finally settles on a California job, then, a few months later, a Chicago heist.

"But here's where things start falling apart. There's almost seven million bucks in the cache now. That's enough to make anyone itchy, even those who grew up wallowing in money. Sharp gal is spreading the loot, okay, but only to various hiding places. The seven mill still exists and splitting and spending is tempting.

"Too, George Fistler is beginning to press. In the beginning, the Green Palms mob had a common denominator for pulling the heists—boredom. George Fistler's motive was slightly more earthy. He wasn't rich, he wanted to be rich. George wants to cut the pie *now*.

"Then a shocker. Somebody already has taken a nibble from the pie. Two one-hundred-dollar bills. They show up in a Miami bank. Serial numbers are checked. There are stories in the newspapers, the two bills are linked to an armored-car robbery in Chicago.

"Another meeting of the minds and Thomas Dobson admits snitching a couple of bills from the take. Result—Dobson dies. Suicide, *bull!* He's murdered. Sharp gal fills young Thomas with booze, and then

George takes him out to a garage, stuffs him into an automobile, hooks up a hose and starts a motor. The next morning—on a 'routine' check—George makes a 'discovery'.

"Rollie McHenry? Sharp gal and George have formed a partnership in murder now. And seven million *is* a lot of dough. So take McHenry out to sea, fill him with beer, push him overboard. That leaves only Frank Danforth to reckon with.

"Except, there's a hornet. Stanley Gold has appeared on the perimeter of the Green Palms crowd. He's new, he seems innocent enough, but he *is* a curious bastard, especially after the death of McHenry. Gold is asking a lot of questions.

"Then a private eye appears. He, too, is asking questions about McHenry. Gold, the eye, the questions make for nervousness. Drastic action is needed. But is there time to plan and execute two more murders, to make the deaths look like suicide or accident?

"Somebody knows how to contact a croaker. Bring in croaker, get rid of the irritants. But hit man fumbles. He only gets half the job done. The eye still roams, is still asking his questions.

"Hey, maybe the eye is a



blessing in disguise! Can he be lured to an out-of-the-way place, like a second-rate motel? Can Frank Danforth be frightened into becoming a killer? Especially if he has a nice easy target, like a big guy looming in a doorway on a dark night? Big guy will have light behind him. Nobody can miss from such short range. But should Danforth miss, the odds are Danforth will get cut down by the eye.

"Either way, the conspirators gain. And if they get *extremely* lucky—if Frank Danforth and the eye should happen to kill each other in a shootout—conspirators will suddenly find themselves on the home stretch

with all other horses out of the race."

Shayne stopped summarizing, yanked an ear lobe. Neither Fistler nor Sally Wooten had moved. Fistler stared at him, in seeming disbelief. Sally Wooten wore a frozen look, her face muscles drawn tight, her skin taut, her eyes narrowed and gleaming.

"Let's get to the boat!" Fistler said suddenly.

Sally Wooten moved a step aside. The change in angle also put her a step closer to the detective. She waggled the gun in her hand, motioning Shayne toward the doorway.

But he fastened a hard look on the seated Fistler. "Couple of problems, George," he said, attempting to keep his tone conversational.

He dipped a hand into his coat pocket. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sally Wooten's gun muzzle tip upward slightly. Fistler started to bring the snout of the submachine-gun down.

"Cigaret?" said Shayne. "Okay?"

No one moved. No one said a word.

"One problem, George," said the detective, taking out the bent pack, "is Danforth. I didn't kill him." He got out a cigaret, stuck it in a corner of his mouth. He lit it and drew on it

heavily. Then he measured Fistler head on.

"Danforth could talk to the cops. He could be bleating his guts out this instant," Shayne said.

Fistler's eyes took on the gleam of a trapped animal. They danced to Sally Wooten.

Shayne continued, "I don't think the boy is going to like the idea of being wounded, being under the thumb of the cops, while you two are here with no pressure. Can Danforth hold up? Can he keep his yap shut when his freedom is threatened? I've got a hunch the kid scares."

Fistler stood, submachine-gun in hand, but he wasn't thinking about the weapon now. "Sally?" It was a plea.

"Cool it, baby," she said. "The guy is baiting you! You think he's a dude to let someone shoot at him and not retaliate? Hell, no! Shayne killed Frankie. Frankie is dead. We don't have to worry about Frankie now. All we have to do is—"

Shayne interrupted, "The other problem, George is who gets to whom first between you two? That's after I've gone over the side of a yacht, of course. You figure the lady here is going to play shares? Seven million—maybe she wants it, maybe she doesn't."

"But she *does* give a damn

about you—because *you* can link her to robbery and murder. You can do that for the rest of your life, even if you split the seven mill right down the line and go your own ways.

"You think the lady is going to live with that kind of threat hanging over her? I'd be damned careful of her, George—especially since she's stashed the cash around the world in her name or under names she's using."

The submachine-gun began to rattle and plaster was flying even before Fistler brought the snout around. Shayne went into a dive. Slugs whispered across his skull, down his spine and over his buttocks. Then a shrill scream mingled with the noise of the gun.

Shayne lashed out with a foot, knocked the lamp table over. His .45 and a lamp bounced on the carpeting. He wriggled like a snake to the gun, grabbed it, rolled onto his back, started to come up. Sudden silence made him stop.

Then, from his strained position, he surveyed the scene. Sally Wooten was stretched out on the carpeting. Her gun was still in her right hand, the fingers of her left hand caught in the shark's tooth choker. She was up on one hip, one knee bent crazily against the other.

Her belly was ripped wide

open. Blood and entrails oozed from her.

Shayne looked for George Fistler, found him in the armchair again. The sub-machine-gun lay on the carpeting. Fistler sat slumped, feet planted, knees wide, head down, the fingers of both hands interlocked over a hole high in his chest. Blood leaked through the fingers.

But he was breathing. A loud rattling sound came from his throat.

XII

WILL GENTRY SAT LOW in the chair behind his desk at police headquarters. With the exception of the black cigar stub that jutted from a corner of his mouth, he looked like a heavy Buddhist priest near sleep. He wasn't.

He growled, "The next time around I wouldn't mind being informed from the top about what the hell is going on in my city. That includes the FBI, Kennedy." He shot the FBI man a black look. "We've got us a going thing, you know. Law enforcement. There's no reason two units aimed at a common goal can't work together—unless it's ego on the part of one."

"I take orders, too, Chief," Kennedy said. "But I can add

this. We checked out Arrow Patrol Service. Fistler is an ex-con from California. He probably heard about the mysterious Mr. Sage and the not-so-mysterious Mr. Phillips in the slammer. I should be able to verify that in the morning, after Fistler wakes up and I've talked to him."

Gentry grunted. His black look whipped to Shayne, and the cigar butt tilted a little higher.

The redhead lighted a cigaret, drew smoke deep, exhaled through his nostrils, stood up, said, "I've got a date."

"Huh?"

Shayne said, "Look, it was the time element, Will. I was moving. Anyway, you've got young Danforth. Maybe the long way around, but you got him."

"Like I got Stanley Gold. Goddamnit, Mike—"

Shayne cut him off. "Not quite. Danforth is still talking. Gold isn't."

"And that's supposed to mean?"

"Some of the loot is stashed in safety deposit boxes around the world. Some may not be. These people wore scuba suits to rob, maybe they wore scuba suits to hide the take. Ask Danforth where to search. From here to the Bahamas, from here to Cuba? That's too large an

area for one man to search—even if the man is me. That takes teamwork, that takes—"

It was Will Gentry's turn to cut off the words. "Mike . . ."

"See you, Will."

He got to the doorway before Gentry said, "A date? At midnight?"

It was the same thing Etta Sales said when she answered the telephone. She sounded as if she had been routed from slumber, but she rallied quickly. "You want to go out at midnight, Shayne? Ohhh—you're exciting! Give me ninety-eight seconds!"

Which was probably about as long as it took her to don what she wore—bright red toenails sticking out of Jesus sandals, scruffy bluejeans, a loose hanging T-shirt that had a beer advertisement splashed on it.

"Ocean Room?" she asked from the far side of the Buick front seat.

"Depends," said the detective. "You want to knock down a doorman or get a damned good steak and mingle with people?"

She thought a moment and then said, "Doormen tumble like bowling pins. Good steaks and people are hard to find."

Shayne took her to The Beef House on Miami Avenue, where Pat, the bartender, put a glass of milk and a Martell and ice water chaser on the woodwork,

then said, "Of course, if milady prefers?"

"She prefers, Patrick," said Shayne.

"Like?"

"Beer," said Etta Sales. Then she added, twinkling, "with a nipple, please."

Pat laughed heartily.

In a back booth, with a second Martell and beer, with steaks ordered and people sliding by . . .

"Hi, Mike. Who's the chick? Introduce me, man! Hi, Etta."

"Hi, Mike, Etta. Pat, at the front bar, told me who she is, Mike."

"Hi, Etta, Mike. You really dig this beat-up old man, Etta?" Laughter.

"Hi, Mike Etta. Ready for another beer, Etta? Cognac, Mike?"

"Mike," said Etta Sales, leaning forward across the booth table that separated them and putting both hands on his, "these really are people."

He nodded.

"I think Stan would have liked them."

"Stan Gold *did* like them," said Shayne. "He dedicated his life to them."

"I've got a hunch I'm going to miss the guy even more than I do now."

She did when Shayne had finished telling her about Stan Gold. She didn't touch the sizzling steak. Nor would she have another beer.

Then suddenly she shook herself down and looked around. "Mike, why have the people stopped coming by?"

"Because they sense we are talking. They sense this is private, and they respect privacy."

"What are you going to tell the McHenrys?"

"The truth."

"Sometimes the truth can be beautiful," she mused from far away. "Sometimes horrendous. I'd like to get back to the people." She looked around again. Abruptly.

Shayne grinned. "Hungry?"

"Famished."

He waved an arm. "Fresh steak in the Number Six booth," Mike Shayne called.



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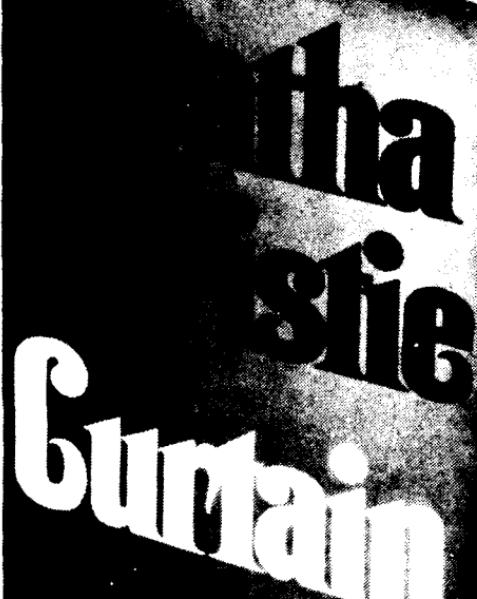
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THREE MAN WOMAN



*When you seek revenge for a slain dog,
it's wise to be sure of the guilty party.*

by WYC TOOLE

AS I CAME OUT of the heavy brush onto the river bank, I saw Whiskey, my prize bird dog. He was hanging by a broken neck at the end of a frayed rope that was tied to the limb

of a big water oak. When I was a kid, I had a tire swing hung on that limb.

The back of my neck got cold as I watched him twisting and swaying in the warm morning

breeze—for there was no question in my mind why he was hanging there. Dewey Wilson was telling me he had waited long enough for his money.

I turned and ran back up the trail to my house. It was a long way and I was breathing hard when I banged through the kitchen door. Sally, my wife, heard me and came running in from the bedroom, asking what was wrong—but I wasn't in any temper to talk with her. I told her to shut up and grabbed the phone. She got mad and started slamming dirty dishes around. I should have hit her right then, but I didn't have time. I could teach her manners later.

Dewey's phone rang a long time before he answered. I was so mad I could hardly talk, but as soon as I recognized his voice I blurted out, "Dewey! This is John! I found my dog!"

"Well, now. I'm right glad to hear that, John. I didn't know he was lost," Dewey answered.

I ignored his smart answer and said bitterly, "I done tole you twice, Dewey Wilson! I didn't steal your money! So, all you bought with killing my dog was more trouble! I'm gonna cut off the water to your farm, right now!"

I slammed down the receiver and headed out the back door. I could hear the phone begin to ring before I reached the bot-

tom step, but I didn't stop. I wasn't going to talk with Dewey anymore.

As I fixed a bulldozer blade on my tractor, I thought about how Dewey and me ever got to such a point. Seems like we would have known better. We're the same age and we grew up together. Our folks had farms side by side when we were kids. Now that our parents are dead, we own the land.

If you look at the way the farms are laid out on the county map, you'll see that, from the river up towards the foothills, mine comes first. It's the smallest—about three hundred acres—but the river runs all the way down one side and a big creek wanders through the back part before it turns northeast and heads up country.

Dewey Wilson's place is a lot bigger than mine, but he hasn't got much water. Neither the creek or the river reach his farm and no matter how hard Dewey or his Daddy tried, they only got one well to come in. We always let the Wilsons run water over from the creek, but I was gonna stop that just as soon as I could. Unless there was an awful lot of rain, his place would dry up in a year.

Thinking on it, however, I guess Dewey and me had to

come to some kind'a showdown sooner or later. We never really did like each other. We only got along at all because there wasn't much else around but the two farms and a lot of timber land. Sally Johnson didn't live too far away, and was always around, but Dewey and me was the only boys within ten miles.

Most of the time it was all right, except when Dewey took it in his head to get mean. Then it was bad. I was always a little scared of Dewey the whole time we were growing up. He didn't seem to mind hurting or killing anything, except Sally.

I guess, if the truth was known, I'm still scared of him. Dewey got meaner as he got older and he wanted my farm for the water. This worries me, because if he ever wants it bad enough, he'll do anything to get it. Sally would probably help him, too. She doesn't like living on a farm.

Marrying Sally wasn't the smartest thing I ever did. She's not much on working, spends too much money and has a bad temper—but, she sure is pretty. From the time I was sixteen, I wanted her. Trouble was, Dewey wanted her too. He was bigger than me in those days, so there wasn't much I could do about it. I know he planned to

marry her, but she got tired of waiting for him to get out'a jail and I was handy. Could be Dewey thinks I stole Sally along with his money.

The money was sort of like everything else we ever did together—trouble. It was all Dewey's idea, though I can't claim I fought too hard. Things just weren't going well for us about six years back. Prices were low, we had a hard winter and the corn blight hit.

Both of us were hurting for money and the bank wanted our land more than they wanted to help us. So, one afternoon when we were out kicking dirt around in Dewey's ruined corn field and wondering what to do next, Dewey said quietly, "Let's you and me jus' go take some money."

I couldn't figure out what he meant at first—but when he explained how we could steal it, it sure seemed like a good idea.

The next weekend, early on Saturday morning, Dewey and me drove two hundred miles up to the capital. We looked things over all that afternoon, while Dewey did the planning. Then, that night, we robbed four liquor stores and a small supermarket right after it closed. When we finished with the supermarket, we never stopped, just drove straight home. We split the money we

stole right down the middle and each of us got a tad over twenty thousand dollars.

The robberies didn't even make the papers down in our part of the state and things would have worked out fine, if Dewey hadn't gotten drunk the next Saturday night over in Bluesville and killed a man in a bar fight. Dewey had a bad reputation for fighting, anyway, and, when they found him guilty of manslaughter, the judge gave him six to ten years in the penitentiary. We were both still clean on the robberies, but Dewey going to jail is what started the big trouble.

Dewey took being in jail real hard. I was farming his place like he asked and doing pretty good by him. I went up to see him twice, but he was so nasty both times that I didn't go back. Sally went off and on for a while. Then she got to thinking about waiting six years and backed off. She started dating me and we got married about six months later. I heard Dewey caused a big fight in the exercise yard when he learned about it. He wrote me a mean letter, too. I burned it.

As you can imagine, I wasn't too happy when Dewey got paroled. But I had an honest count ready for him on his crop money when he came home, and his farm in good shape. He

seemed to be so pleased with that, I even thought we'd be able to get the marriage thing smoothed over. I found out how wrong I was before noon that day.

I was sitting down to eat, when he came running back to my place yelling I was a dirty thief. Said I had stolen his twenty thousand dollars. Claimed he hid it in his barn before he went to jail and it was gone. Funny thing was, I had found his money in an old box in the hay loft—but I left it there.

No tellin' who did take it, if it was gone. I tolle him he was crazy, that I didn't need his money. But Dewey was wild. He said I was responsible and I'd better find it or he'd take it out of my hide. That was a month ago and I guess my dog was meant to be the first cut.

I stopped thinking about all that when the tractor was ready. I drove it straight out to the north fields and covered over the irrigation ditches that took water from the big creek to Dewey's place. That evened things up for my dog.

Later that afternoon, I drove over to the crossroads store for gas. Sally had been there earlier and everybody knew about the dog and me cutting off the water to Dewey's farm. They were all excited and kept ask-

ing me what was going to happen next. I wasn't sure, but I knew it wasn't going to be anything good. It made me feel right sick.

The next morning, I was working in the front yard when Dewey came driving up the narrow road to my place. He was going so fast his truck was fishtailing in the soft dirt and throwing clouds of dust all the way up the tops of the big pecan trees that lined the driveway.

I reached the steps of my porch as Dewey jammed on his brakes and leaped out of the pickup. He was a lean, stringy man, with black lank hair that hung down over his forehead and then stopped just short of his cold blue eyes. He had a bad scar from a razor cut on his left cheek and his thin face was pale. His mouth smiled, but his eyes didn't.

"John!" he yelled as the engine died. "I came to talk about my water."

"Maybe we better talk about my dog first," I answered.

"I don't know nothin' about your dog. I hear you found one dead. That's too bad. Good dogs are hard to get. Must'a been caught stealin'. That's a bad business, stealin'."

Just then, the front door opened and Sally came out on the porch. I noticed she had

brushed her blonde hair shiny and put on a clean dress since I last saw her in the kitchen. She had a little red flower stuck in the "V" part of the dress that was low enough to show the edges of her full bosoms. She smiled at us like nothing at all was going on and said, "Hi, Dewey. How you?"

"Hi, Sally, gal. You look pretty this mornin'!" The mean edge went off his voice and his eyes were locked on that flower like he never saw one before.

"Well, thank you, Dewey. I feel good as a June bug with its own fig tree. Glad *somebody* notices." She looked right at me. "I jus' made some lemonade. Come on in out of this *terrible* heat and have some," she offered.

Before he could move I said, "We got business, Sally. Go on in the house!"

"Well, I declare! I was jus' being—"

"Go in the house, Sally!" I insisted.

She started to speak again, but thought better of it. She glared at me and smiled at Dewey. He grinned back. There was a pause when I thought she might push it, but she turned and walked back in the house, slamming the door behind her.

Dewey smiled broadly, "You got a real handful there."

"We ain't talking about my wife, Dewey!"

His face got mean again. "That's right. We ain't. We're talkin' about stealin' money and water."

"Go to hell!" I said evenly. I turned and walked up the steps to my porch, into the house and slammed the front door hard behind her.

I waited in the front room until Dewey left. Then, I walked back to the kitchen. Sally was sitting at the breakfast table drinking lemonade. I pointed down at the flower and said, "You go put some clothes on."

She smiled at me over the top of her glass and said, "You used to think they were pretty as peach blossoms."

"I still do." I relented. "But maybe I don't want to share nothin' with Dewey."

Sally's face got thoughtful. "I hate to admit it, but you might be right, John. Dewey has *sure* been lookin' at me funny since he got back."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she shrugged. "Kind'a like he's hungry. Makes me feel like I don't have no clothes on," she laughed nervously.

"He say anything to you?" my voice got hard.

"No. He jus' looks," she said slowly. "I don't like it much

either. Dewey's gotten real bad."

"Well, don't you worry none. I'll take care of Dewey. You jus' let me know if he gets smart with you."

She got up from the table and came over to me. She put my hand on the flower and said, "I know you'll watch out for me, but you be careful, too. I don't know what you two are fightin' about this time, but it must be bad. Hangin' Whiskey was the worst thing I ver saw and I know you're gonna *have* to do somethin' about it. I want you to know I'll help. Dewey's changed since he got back. He's like a wild animal lately."

"*Lately!* Dewey's always been wild! You think they put him in that penitentiary for a rest?"

My voice must have gotten a little too high, because Sally looked at me closely and asked, "You scared, John?"

I lowered my eyes. "No. I ain't scared," I lied. "But I'm afraid somebody's gonna get killed and I don't plan on it bein' you or me."

Sally turned and walked back around the table. She sat down and sipped at her lemonade before she said, "I'm glad to hear you say that, John. I'm *really* glad. Because I'm scared! I don't want him to hurt me. That's why I was tryin' so hard to be friendly a while ago. I feel

like a fruit fly caught in a barn web every time I get near him."

I left the kitchen, went out to the tractor shed and thought about what Sally had said. The more I thought, the madder I got. It looked like Dewey might want Sally even more than the money. The only way he was gonna get her was with me dead—but, I doubted if that would seem much of a problem to Dewey. Once I got that straight in my mind, the answer was simple. I'd kill him before he killed me.

I spent the rest of the afternoon plowing the fields near the house and figuring out the best way to kill Dewey without me going to jail. By the time I finished the last rows and put the tractor away, I had a plan.

In my gun case, I had a .38 pistol I had borrowed from Dewey before he went to jail. I doubt if he even remembered I had it. Also, I knew I could get him to come over to my farm if I told him I *did* take his money and would give it back. Putting the two together, the rest was easy.

I would tell Sally that Dewey wanted to square things and was coming over to talk out our troubles about the dog and the water. She was to stay in the house. When he came, I was going to shoot him with his own gun. Then, my story would be

that we got in an argument, Dewey pulled his pistol and I jumped him. The gun went off and killed him. Sally could swear to everything but the actual shooting. I wanted to spare her that. Nobody knew about the money, so they wouldn't doubt what I said, not knowing what Dewey was like.

Sally was real sweet that night, although she sure got worried when I told her I was gonna try to work things out with Dewey one more time. She begged me not to and cried some, but, finally calmed down and said it might be best after all. I sure had her in the right mood for what was gonna happen.

The next morning, I called Dewey and told him I didn't want any more trouble. That if he'd come over, I'd give him his money and we could work out something on the water. He was almost crowing, he was so happy. He always did like to make me eat dirt. Said he'd be over in an hour.

I told Sally to stay in the house. When she wasn't looking, I took the .38 out of my gun drawer and went outside. I stuck it in the back of my belt, where it couldn't be seen from the front, sat down under the chinaberry tree and waited.

I waited over an hour before Dewey drove up. He got out of

his truck real slow and walked over to me. I stood up to meet him, moving so he couldn't see the pistol in the back of my belt. As I did, I caught a quick glimpse of Sally's blonde hair moving back from the front window.

"Glad you finally got some sense, John. It's sure time we got this mess settled. You got my money ready?" Dewey asked.

"Well, yes and no," I said lamely. For some reason, I was nervous as a wet cat. I planned to pull that gun and shoot him right then. But I couldn't. That scared me and my voice quivered as I played for time to get my nerves settled. "We'll have to go down to the barn and get it."

"I give you plenty'a time to have it ready," Dewey said sharply, "so I ain't goin' down to no barn with you. I'll jus' wait right here while you go get it. That way you're not gonna be tempted to do nothin' foolish." Dewey turned and walked back to his truck. I took a step after him, but I still couldn't bring myself to shoot him. I don't know why. I just couldn't.

Dewey reached his truck, opened the door on the driver's side, bent over and came out with a shotgun. He turned quickly and pointed it at me.



"You can stop right there, John. I've changed my mind," Dewey said smiling, "No need for you to go get that money after all."

Before I could answer him, he yelled, "Sally, come out here a minute."

Sally came out on the porch and stood watching us. She didn't say a word. I started to move, but Dewey stopped me with a wave of the shotgun barrel.

I got worried for Sally and said anxiously, "Wait a minute, Dewey! I'm gonna give you your money! What'cha doin'?"

"Well, John, it's right easy to figure out what I'm doin' if you'll think a little," Dewey

smiled coldly. "Instead of gettin' a measly twenty thousand dollars, I'm gonna kill you and get Sally, your farm and *all* the money. You gotta admit that's a much better deal." He laughed.

"You've lost your mind!" I yelled at him. "You shoot me in my yard, right in front of Sally, and you're gonna get nothing but a rope around your neck."

"John," Dewey said patiently, "there's things you ain't noticin'. Like this here is *your* gun. And guess who gave it to me?" he laughed.

I looked at the shotgun. It was mine. I looked up at Sally, but she turned her eyes away. "I don't see how that helps," I lied. I had to keep him talking, because I know if I got another chance now, I could kill him.

"You're thickheaded then," Dewey continued, "so I'll spell it out for you. I'm kinda enjoyin' this anyway." Sally turned and went back in the house.

"Ever since I got back," Dewey said, "I been tryin' to work out a way to get rid'a you. It wasn't easy, 'cause I got a bad reputation. And Sally said if there was killin' involved, I had to do it. She wouldn't even talk about helpin' me. Now, I could think of a lot of ways to kill you, John, but none that wouldn't point at me."

"Then your dog got hung." He paused and shook his head. "You probably won't believe me, but I didn't kill that dog. Though I'll admit, it was a lucky thing for me it happened, 'cause when you thought I did it and cut off the water to my farm"—Dewey snapped the fingers of his left hand—"I knew jus' that quick how to kill you and get away with it, especially when Sally finally said she'd help."

Dewey nodded his head and smiled. "Think about it, John. Here I am, innocent as a new-born babe, and you do a mean thing like cuttin' off the water that keeps my farm alive. It was like cuttin' my throat. What else could I do but come over and try to get you to talk things out. Trouble was, no matter what I said, you were as hardheaded as ever."

Dewey paused, spit and then continued, "Don't take a genius to see that would get us in a fight. Sally hears the ruckus and runs out to stop us. But you won't listen to her. You grab this shotgun"—Dewey grinned—"and when I try to take it away from you, it goes off accidentally and kills you."

"Lucky thing for me that Sally's gonna be able to tell everybody how I tried not to fight—how peaceful I was and how hard she tried to stop you. Yes,

sir—having Sally as a witness is sure gonna make this trial go a lot better than my last one." He kept the gun pointed at me as he talked.

Just at that moment the back door slammed and I caught a glimpse of Sally running towards the barn. The noise and her movement distracted Dewey and he turned his head to see what was happening. It was all the break I needed. I pulled the pistol from the back of my belt and shot him. His fingers jerked the triggers of the shotgun in reflex, but he was already dying and both blasts missed me.

Things got quiet under the tree. The smell of powder hung in the air and I could hear the bees buzzing and the wind rustling the trees. It was real peaceful.

I walked over and looked at Dewey. He was dead. I took the shotgun from his hands, checked his pockets, found more shells and used them to load my gun. I'd find Sally and see what was going on. Then, maybe I'd shoot her.

I looked a long time. In the barn. Down by the river. All through the brush line. But it was a big farm. I really didn't have much chance of finding her. I finally decided to go back to the house and wait. She had to come home eventually. It

was possible she was just letting me calm down. Her running out the back door sure didn't make it seem as if she was helping Dewey too much—because, if she hadn't run, I'd be the dead one right now.

Could be, she had some fool idea to help me get rid'a Dewey and it got out'a hand. The smart thing would be to wait and talk with her. So I went back through the fields to the house. When I got there, the Sheriff and three deputies were waiting. By the time I saw them, they saw me—and Sally was with 'em. Seems she called 'em just before she ran out the back door . . .

SINCE THEN, I've had a lot of time to sit in this cell with nothing to do but think. And, I sure look at Sally different than I did. Ever since we were kids, I thought she was dumb. Now I see how wrong I was. She's like one of those pretty little snakes that can hide anywhere while they move easy and soft to get what they want.

Turned out, I'm the dumb one. I didn't understand anything that was going on until she came to see me about the divorce papers. When I signed them, because she could get one anyway after the trial, I said to her, "The only good thing about

this for me is you ain't gonna get Dewey."

There was just the two of us in that little barred room, with a guard outside the door, but she kept her voice low and smiled as she said, "Dewey! John, you're a bigger idiot than a flop-eared mule. I never liked Dewey any better than I did you. I found me a fellow in Bluesville about a year ago who doesn't smell like cow manure. Soon as your trial's over, we're headin' for a *big* city. I'm gonna have some fun for a change."

"That takes money, Sally. I hope he's rich," I said bitterly.

"Why, sweetie, he doesn't have to be rich. *I* am! I've got the farm, our bank account and the forty thousand you and Dewey stole."

I sat straight up in my chair. "You took Dewey's twenty thousand out'a the barn?"

"Course I did. I heard you and Dewey talkin' about the robberies right after you did 'em. All I had to do after that was keep my eyes open. I'm a natural-born sneak, John. Knew where you hid yours, too," she said, smiling broadly. "But it wasn't the money that was important, sweetie. The important thing was to get free of you and Dewey.

"I been stuck out in the weeds all my life, with you two hangin' around me like a pair

of bad tempered watch dogs. Nothin' with pants on could get near enough to pull me out. I knew good and well you'd never let me loose. And if anythin' happened to you—like dyin'—Dewey would think he had next claim on me. No doubt in my mind, Dewey would have killed any man I took up with in preference to him. So I had to get rid of you both. Stealin' Dewey's money was jus' a way to get you fightin'."

"Then *you* killed Whiskey?" I asked in disbelief.

"There wasn't anythin' else I could do, sweetie. I gave you and Dewey enough trouble over money and me for two shootins and nothin' happened. Lord knows, I was workin' hard as an autumn squirrel to get you two to kill each other and all you did was talk loud. I was plumb put out with you both. Finally I remembered you fool men get madder over dogs than people. So I killed Whiskey to see if that would help. You gotta admit it worked. Things moved faster than a flea on a hot rock after you found that dog."

"So you didn't care which one of us was left alive when you called the Sheriff?" I asked softly.

"No. Not really. Once I saw you both had guns, I knew I'd won. I called the Sheriff and

ran. I thought maybe you'd talked enough that whichever one was left might decide to kill me, too." She paused and wet her lips with her tongue. "You know, John, what I plan to tell the judge is gonna put you in jail for a long time."

"I know," I answered. "And there's not a thing I can do to stop you. *Is there?*"

"Not one thing, John. Not one blessed thing. I never broke a single law. I'm free and I'm gonna stay that way."

"Yeah, I guess you will," I said hopelessly. "Looks like you got things wrapped up tight. I never knew anybody could be so damn mean. Tell me, Sally, didn't killin' Whiskey bother you none? You raised him from a puppy. He was your dog more than mine."

Sally's eyes got cold and her voice harsh as she replied, "You forget. I kind'a raised you and Dewey too. So, it didn't bother me a bit to hang one more of my dogs."

In the Next Issue—

DEATH IN A SMALL PACKAGE

A Thrilling New Mike Shayne Complete Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Wildon was a roistering old-fashioned barnstorming flyer whose lack of scruple was matched only by his love for a teen-aged daughter. When the girl came to Shayne with word that her father was missing and had left \$5,500 in her care, the Miami private eye went to work tracing his old friend, who seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth. It took a lot of hard work to run Wildon down, and when Shayne did find him, he almost wished he hadn't. Then the bullets began to fly and the body count began to total up.

THE OMEGA SERVICE

The research office looked legitimate all the way through, apart from its practice of hiring flawed employees like Ollie Plante. But Caveretta wondered what Ollie had to sign that gave him the horrifying nightmares that kept on awakening his wife.

by JERRY JACOBSON

CAVERETTA HAD A small office in a crumbling building on Geary but he hadn't occupied it for weeks. That was because he hadn't had any business in weeks. Instead, he stuck pretty much to his cramped apartment on Turk Boulevard, eating stove-top rigatoni and onion sandwiches, waiting for his service to transfer some business and deciding San Francisco wasn't the best place in the world to wait out a recession.

There was the rain, of course—and the fog. But mostly, what made a recession tough to bear was the city's compactness. Sprawling cities like Los Angeles or Portland, to a lesser degree, could hide unemployment in urban sprawl. But when people out of work in San Francisco walked the

streets in broad daylight they were nearly shoulder to shoulder. It gave Caveretta the blues.

He might have remained blue for weeks had not Lieutenant Kile called. Kile was with S.F.P.D.'s Homicide Division. Because of Kile, small dabs of business came Caveretta's way and he was grateful. The year before there had even been a windfall of \$10,000 because of Kile. A Nob Hill lady hired Caveretta to find an errant nephew who was supposed to have been in the process of matriculation at San Francisco University but wasn't.

Caveretta was to look for him in the North Beach area or the hippy regions around Golden State Park, pick up the pieces of him and return him home.

Caveretta, after a good deal of sweat, hustle, inquiries and seedy disguises did just that.

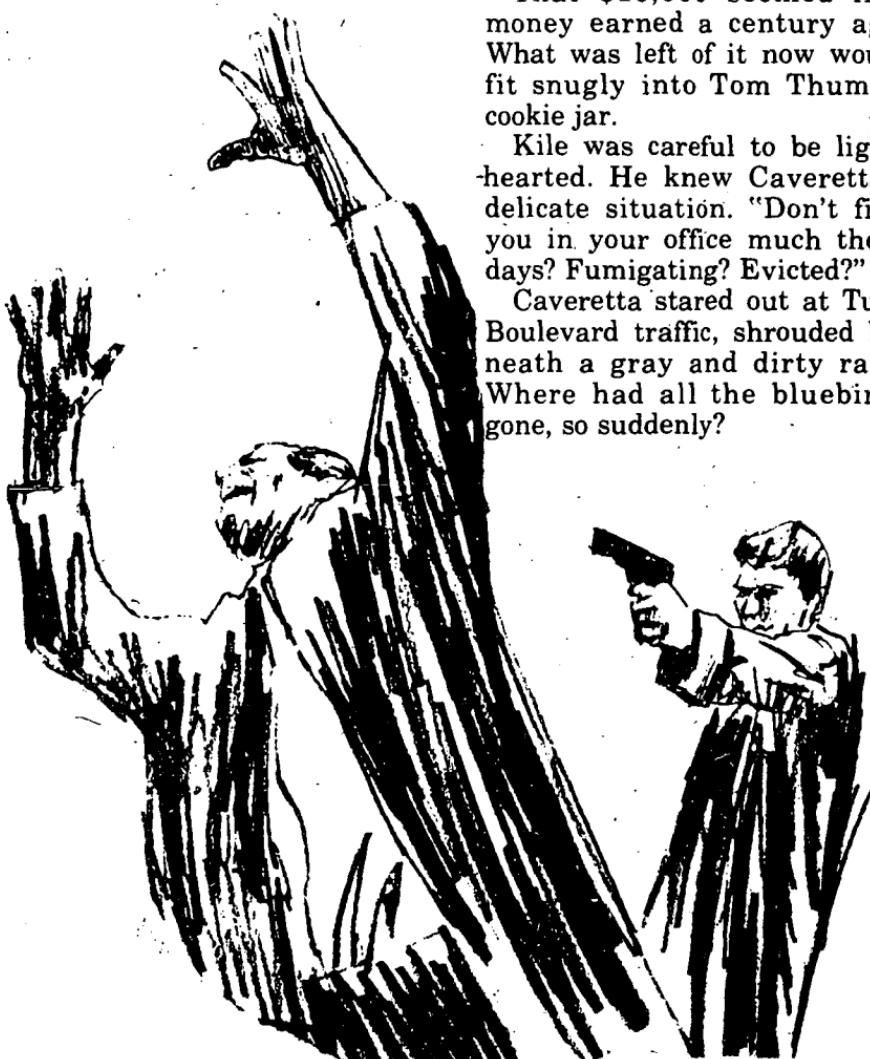
The aunt promptly paid Caveretta and then promptly

had the nephew killed, before Caveretta was completely divorced from the matter. He'd put Kile onto it and Kile had got a dandy arrest and a nice commendation in his file.

That \$10,000 seemed like money earned a century ago. What was left of it now would fit snugly into Tom Thumb's cookie jar.

Kile was careful to be light-hearted. He knew Caveretta's delicate situation. "Don't find you in your office much these days? Fumigating? Evicted?"

Caveretta stared out at Turk Boulevard traffic, shrouded beneath a gray and dirty rain. Where had all the bluebirds gone, so suddenly?



"I got two pieces of good news for you," Kile told him. "Well, one is definitely good, the other depends upon your viewpoint."

"I'll take any news you got, Kile. I've had it with the museums and I've had it with the tuna casseroles at the apartments of port secretaries and meter maids. In fact, these past weeks I've had diarrhea that's been more interesting."

"Try this, then. Remember that bus depot locker business two years ago? The three thou you tracked to the locker that no one claimed for sixteen weeks?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, a district court's just turned in a decree overturning that found-property decision. Remember how that went down, Caveretta."

"So what? It's police property now."

"Not what the court says. It's a citizen's find. It don't belong in police or city property, can't go into the general fund."

"So what are you trying to say, Kile?"

"I'm trying to say, so how do you want it? Cash, check or money order?"

The bluebirds were back. "I'll drop by and pick up the cash," he told Kile, not succeeding in keeping the gratitude and relief out of his voice. "The city's got an unbalanced budget this

biennium I hear. What's the other piece of news that depends on my viewpoint?"

"We've just turned away a prospective client," said Kile. "Woman named Plante—Raye Plante. Came in the other day with a backload of allegations and suspicions. We listened, fed her coffee and then sent her away. Hated to. But when the book is staring at you on the desk, you have to go by it."

"So why couldn't she do any business?" Caveretta said.

"No crime, no criminal. But her story possesses—elements."

"So does a hydrogen bomb. What *elements*, exactly?

"She can't pay, Caveretta. At least nothing more than walking-around money. But I figure since you got a windfall out of us, you'd look into it. She lives on Mariposa. Two kids, and a husband whose recent actions have her a little confused."

Caveretta jotted down her address. What the hell. He had his meal ticket for the rest of the month if he didn't go out and pretend he was an Arabian with a lot of oil derricks in his backyard.

"We can't spare the time or the people on this one, Cav'. And the woman hasn't anywhere else to turn. I owe you, buddy."

The Plante apartment was

located east of the Mission district, a walk-up world where all lives ended in despair, where wet wash hung on back-porch lines strung across a rocky hill to the apartments facing the Plante's. Scruffy children wandered the alleys with winos and stray dogs. Caveretta had been in constant war with this world and not without solid reason—it was the cruel, barren world in which he had grown up.

He took the shaky stairs up three flights, looking at the tops of his shoes, not wanting to see his memories. The apartments were two-to-a-floor—one front, one rear. The Plante's was 3-B—third-floor back. He looked through a grimed kitchen window. A young boy sat in the middle of a dull kitchen floor, pounding pegs into a board with a wooden mallet. His knock brought a young woman in a faded housecoat of flowers and a look of defeat on her pretty face.

"Yes?"

"My name is Caveretta. Lieutenant Kile referred you to me."

"More talk? More little trips around the mulberry bush? Let's just forget it, Lieutenant Caveretta."

"I'm not a police detective, Mrs. Plante. I'm a private investigator."



"The court of last resort," said Mrs. Plante. "Well, come on in. I guess it's better than having no day in court at all."

The boy playing on the kitchen floor was named Ollie, Jr., after her husband. The place smelled of cooked cabbage and tension. In the cramped little living room, Mrs. Plante flicked off the television and offered Caveretta a seat on a purple sofa far past its prime.

"Any special place you want me to begin, Mr. Caveretta?"

"The beginning might be useful."

The woman grimaced and saw Caveretta staring at the narrow martel, one end of which was occupied by a small

cluster of basketball trophies and two framed photographs—one showing a half-circle of high-school basketball players around a ball painted in white letters STATE CHAMPS—1970, the other depicting a gangly boy with long, draping arms going through the ballet of a sweeping hook-shot.

"You ever read a book called *Rabbit, Run*, Mr. Caveretta?" said Mrs. Plante, her sarcastic Caucasian tone biting into his ear. "About the former high school basketball hero who wouldn't give up the games and settle down to responsibility? Well, Ollie is the original Rabbit Angstrom, the faded hero. Industrial basketball, alley basketball, gym-rat basketball. When Ollie, a hoop and a ball get together, you can just forget it for about six hours."

"Where does your husband work?" Caveretta asked, still looking around at the frowzy apartment.

"He doesn't. Hasn't for over a year. He's an operating engineer. You know—cranes, piledrivers, clamshells, back-hoes. Heavy equipment. It's what he did in Vietnam." Her tone turned ironical. "At least there, you knew you always had work. You build something, it gets blown up, you rebuild it, they reblow it up. Steady work."

ALSO ON THE MANTEL was an enlarged color photograph of a young boy and the woman's uncanny knack for sensing where attention was being focused continued.

"Rafe is five now," she told Caveretta. "Our other son. He's been at Sisters of Mercy Hospital about five months. Stomach cancer. Can you beat that? A five-year-old stomach that hasn't even been *used* yet?"

Caveretta shifted the conversation away from the elements of pain. "Lieutenant Kile wouldn't tell me about this matter that has you so worried, Mrs. Plante. I suspect he didn't want any of its elements misrepresented."

The woman had trouble tearing her eyes from the photograph of her son. "It has to do with a Mr. Starkweather."

Caveretta nodded.

"I think I'd better go back a ways for this," she told him. "About a year ago, we made friends with some neighbors, a young couple like us—Vy and Augie Smythe. They had the apartment upstairs-rear, the next house over. They were pure loves.

Ollie and I didn't know anyone in this neighborhood when we moved in. Didn't want to. It's a little shoddy and tacky here, as you can see. Lots of dope, some hookers and their

pimps. The cops are down here all the time on one thing or another."

Caveretta lit a cigaret and let Mrs. Plante continue her narrative. She was relaxing in his presence.

"Anyway, Vy and Augie were great to us. Augie was working as a cargo handler for the port authority down on the docks and he got Ollie onto a gang, set him up with the union and the hiring boss and everything. I was with Vy when she had her little girl and Ollie and Augie were good pals. We were over at their place all the time and they knew our door was always open to them as well.

"Things were going just swell for all four of us," Mrs. Plante went on. "Ollie wasn't getting the kind of work he was trained for in the army, but he was working steady and Ollie Jr. and Rafe were growing and eating like baby horses. Then one afternoon, Augie got into an argument with a cargo checker over hanging out when he should have been working.

"'Hanging out' is when you smoke or wander around the warehouse or just generally avoid work. Well, all morning Augie had been doing the work of *three men* in his gang and he didn't figure he should have been coming in for all the abuse the checker was giving

him. So he snatched up a pallet brace—a piece of timber—and went after the checker with it. By the time they pulled Augie off, the checker was beaten to a bloody pulp.

"He spent nine days in the hospital with lots of operations on his skull and chest. Augie was arrested and charged with AWD, assault with a deadly weapon. He lost his job, got ninety days in jail and had to pay the portions of the checker's hospital bills that weren't covered by union hospitalization or workman's compensation.

"Well, things really went bad for Vy and Augie after that, after he got out of jail. The recession was getting its hinkiest and Augie didn't even have a high school diploma. He couldn't find work anywhere. When his unemployment compensation ran out, he started hanging around the bars on Market Street, getting in with the bad elements.

"He stole a couple of cars for a theft ring, began breaking into hotel rooms, that sort of thing. I mean, he hadn't been identified for any jobs yet, but it was just a question of time before he bungled one or shot a cop or something. Vy was going to leave him.

"The tears she cried over at our place could have made a

swimming pool in our kitchen. Augie beat her up a few times. Maybe he felt stripped of his manhood and that was the only way he could show he was still a man. It was a bad situation any way you look at it."

She paused to ask Caveretta if he wanted some coffee. He shook his head, smiled as best he could under what he'd been hearing and told her to go on.

"This is about where this Starkweather turns up," Mrs. Plante went on. "Well not him, exactly—*letter* from him. From his office in The Stanford Court on Nob Hill. It's a very posh hotel, right up there with the Mark Hopkins.

"In his letter, Starkweather says he's the president of this company called Omega Service and that Augie Smythe's name was referred to him for employment and that Augie should call him back for an interview appointment."

"This Omega Service," interjected Caveretta. "What sort of company is it?"

"They do statistical research, mainly," said Mrs. Plante. "They acquire contract work to do demographics on all sorts of things for government and private industry. You know. Preferences—dog food, television programs, laundry detergents, political affiliations and who you might vote for in up-

coming elections, things like that."

"And Augie Smythe picked up on the interview," Caveretta said.

"He called Mr. Starkweather the next day and went for his interview the same afternoon. He was hired almost on the spot. Well, things really started getting rosy for them. Augie was wearing suits to work and taking the four of us out to dinner at least once a week and buying Vy all sorts of things for the apartment—a stereo and their own washer and some high-back green velvet chairs for their dining room set and a pecan hutch I saw advertised in the *Chronicle* for about five-hundred and fifty dollars."

"So Augie Smythe and family were making it."

"Blues permanently gone," said Raye Plante, without a twinge of jealousy in her tone. "And then, about eight months ago, Augie was transferred to Kansas City. We had a going-away party, a lot of sloppy goodbyes. We began to miss them the instant they drove off."

"The Starkweather connection doesn't seem too clear to me," Caveretta said. "What is it about him has you so upset that you'd bring in the police?"

"About three weeks after Vy and Augie left for Kansas City,

Ollie got hired as an oiler, an engineer's helper. They wouldn't let him operate any of the big rigs, but at least he had his foot in the door in the kind of work he was trained for and liked. He checked the cable systems on the cranes, oiled and maintained hydraulic systems. They really liked his work and told him he'd be working into an operating engineer's job very soon.

"But they lied to him. Three months and they didn't let Ollie within *fifty feet* of any machinery. One day, he blew up. He spent the morning drinking in a bar. At noon he drove across town to the job site, where they were putting in some sewers near the Japanese Trade Center.

"The job was shut down for lunch and so Ollie simply climbed up behind the wheel of a backhoe, kicked it on and began smashing all the pipe he could find. When they finally pulled him off, there wasn't enough undamaged pipe to get sewage ten yards down the street.

"Ollie was fired on the spot, of course. They could have had him arrested, but that might have brought on a lawsuit by Ollie for discriminatory job practices, so they just had him removed from the job site.

"Then the recession *really* hit



the fan. Ollie was out of work six months. He didn't even *look* for anything. No unemployment compensation, because he was canned, but we got one-thirty a-month welfare settlement because of Ollie, Jr., and some food stamps. Ollie loved it, loved being out of work. He drank up most of the welfare money in the evenings and hawked pick-up basketball games in parish gyms and schoolyards in the daytime."

"Being out of work usually frightens people," Caveretta said.

"The only thing good old Ollie has ever been afraid of," said Mrs. Plante, "is growing up. I was thinking very seri-

ously about leaving him to his pouting and his games when Ollie, Jr. got sick. For once, Ollie's foolish stubbornness and tenacity went for some good. They kept little Ollie Jr. alive and fighting.

"And then the letter came from Mr. Starkweather inviting Ollie for an interview. I sobered him up and got him dressed and told Ollie to take anything Mr. Starkweather had to offer, even if it was addressing envelopes or taking out the trash. And to give Augie Smythe's name as a personal reference."

"And this Starkweather hired your husband?"

"The same afternoon, just like he hired Augie "Smythe."

"To do the same kind of work?"

"Statistics, same as Augie did. He wears a suit, he leaves the apartment at seven-thirty every weekday morning for Starkweather's office in The Stanford Court, comes home at five-thirty every night."

"And does he talk with you much about the work he does for this Omega Service?"

"Some, yes. He sends out questionnaires, visits stores and makes notes on consumer buying habits, talks to people on the street."

Caveretta explained that as far as he could tell there didn't seem to be anything over which

the woman ought to be worried.

"Except for this—" the woman said then, as her expression plunged into dark suspicion. "Three times now, Ollie's been awakened in the middle of the night by a nightmare of some sort. His body was drenched with perspiration and he was thrashing in bed like he was having a street brawl with his conscience. And he talked in his sleep each time before he woke up."

"Were you able to make any sense out of what he said in his sleep?" Caveretta asked.

"All three times he said the same things. That he had to sign a paper, that someone made him sign a paper and that he didn't like what he was doing, but that it had to be done, that he had to get himself out of debt and that this was the only way."

"Did he mention who it was that *made him* sign this paper?"

"No."

"Did your husband mention any names at all?"

"No."

Caveretta scribbled down some notes.

"Mr. Caveretta, I think Ollie is involved in something terrible here, and I think it has to do with Mr. Starkweather."

Caveretta rose and closed his note pad. Mrs. Plante escorted

him back through the house to the kitchen, where little Ollie rushed him and clamped one of his legs in a bear hug.

"He thinks you're his father," Mrs. Plante said. "From the little Ollie, Jr. sees of him, his father could be anyone at all."

"I'll see what I can do for you, Mrs. Plante."

"I can't pay you anything right now. Ollie is drinking more than he was when he wasn't working and he says Starkweather isn't paying him all that much, anyway."

"Don't worry about it," Caveretta told her. "Money has always tended to make me slothful and overweight."

THE FIRST THING Caveretta did was call Lieutenant Kile for background checks on Ollie Plante, Augie Smythe and the mysteriously benevolent Mr. Starkweather of Omega Service, who parcelled out jobs to total strangers with doubtful skills and credentials. He also wanted to know from Kile if Starkweather's statistical service did the kind of business it advertised or was simply a front for some other sort of enterprise. Kile said he would get back to him.

The next order of business seemed to be to pay a visit to the unusually philanthropic Mr. Starkweather.

The Stanford Court was named after a former Governor of California, a magnificent home rebuilt as a hotel after the place went up in flames in San Francisco's fire and earthquake of 1906. Now it was a richly elegant hostelry with marble-walled bathrooms and armoires and a dining room with French paneled walls, damask table linen and high Baccarat chandeliers of elegant glass.

The offices of The Omega Service were located on the seventh of the hotel's eight floors. Starkweather's business neighbors were respectable enough: a two-man law firm, the studios for a popular FM radio station, a world-wide tours service and a well-regarded employment agency.

Behind the tall oaken door of The Omega Service, Caveretta was further impressed by thick-pile orange carpets, a reception desk well-furnished with intercom, dictaphone, telephones and piles of paperwork. Prints by Hooper and Picasso adorned the walls, along with a couple of African ancestral masks that looked genuine.

The young woman at the reception desk looked bright and efficient. A desk nameplate said she was Miss Peabody.

Politely, she told Caveretta

that Mr. Starkweather would be out of the office for the remainder of the afternoon and would he care to make an appointment for the next day? Caveretta said yes and she put him down for two o'clock.

"Is Mr. Plante in?" Caveretta asked.

Miss Peabody smiled and checked what appeared to be an assignment sheet.

"Mr. Plante is doing a statistical survey in Sausalito," she said. "Wine shops. If it's important, I'll be glad to give you his itinerary."

Caveretta said that would be appreciated. The girl jotted down the names and addresses of three wine shops and the times Ollie Plante was expected at each. Caveretta wasn't going to confront Ollie Plante just yet with any questions or accusations. But he *did* want to call all these shops later in the day to learn if Plante was actually doing the work Starkweather had hired him to do.

At four p.m. Lieutenant Kile got back to Caveretta. All three men were as clean as babes. Apart from Augie Smythe's assault rap, there was no police record on any of them. And The Omega Service was indeed a bona fide statistical service. It had clients and accounts, it paid its rents and taxes and, while it wasn't showing much

growth, it did a steady business and seemed in no danger of insolvency. Besides Starkweather and Miss Peabody the receptionist, it had six employees.

Caveretta then checked with the three wine shops in Sausalito—the Arbor, the Cork and Bottle and the Vintage Cellars. All three indicated to him that Ollie Plante had indeed called on them for some consumer statistics.

The next afternoon, Starkweather greeted Caveretta cordially in his stylish office of rich woods and dark leathers. Nothing in his appearance seemed remarkably—even remotely—sinister or mysterious. He was a man in his fifties, with hair that was salt-and-pepper in texture and color, a man of somewhat rigid bearing but with a quick warm smile.

"Mr. Plante is working out very well for us," he told Caveretta, "as is his friend, Mr. Smythe. He's with our Kansas City office now, you know. Working out well there, too."

Carefully, Caveretta asked about this habit he seemed to have of hiring down-and-outers when there were so many hundreds of out-of-work young men better educated and more highly skilled.

Starkweather chuckled easily. "Yes, quite a number of

people in the business community regard me as something of a maverick employer. I seek out young men whose talents seem to be beneath the average, troubled young men, essentially good men to whom life has been dealing bad hands.

Potentially, at this point in their lives, these men could move in either direction—toward fruitful, productive, honorable lives or in the direction of darker enterprises, or even no enterprises at all—perhaps even crime. I've simply sought out some of these young people to give them a taste of success, oh—minor success to be sure—but honest, prideful employment nonetheless, a low springboard. Springboards can be deceptive, Mr. Caveretta. From them, who knows how high a man may soar?"

He found Starkweather to be a thoroughly likable—almost an admirable—sort. But there still lay at the back of Caveretta's mind, this murky business of the paper-signing by which Ollie Plante seemed troubled. Bringing the issue up to Starkweather now might bring on immediate suspicion and antagonism, so Caveretta said nothing on it.

Starkweather now had his own question. "Mr. Caveretta, excuse me, but you still haven't told me whom *you* represent."

Caveretta had already fashioned an excuse for that. It was a bit lame but it would have to do.

"I'm a private investigator, Mr. Starkweather. I was hired by Mrs. Plante. As you probably know, her husband has been out of work for some while and then suddenly indicated to her that he'd found a job with your company. When he began bringing home money, she found it hard to believe he'd found something legitimate, since he wasn't saying much at all about the kind of work he did."

"She suspected he might be involved in something illegal and hired me to find out the truth. Is Mr. Plante regularly employed here with you, Mr. Starkweather? What I mean is, has he turned up for work every day?"

"For the past five weeks," said Starkweather, no suspicion showing in his expression. A very good worker—punctual, thorough, sincere. She has every reason to be proud of him."

"Then if you'll be kind enough to write to Mrs. Plante explaining these things, my job will be over."

"I'll have the letter out before five o'clock, Mr. Caveretta."

Caveretta shook hands with Starkweather and left.

All the way back to his

apartment on Turk, Caveretta had the empty, sinking feeling he'd worked his way down a narrow street to a dead end. Left to go on was Ollie Plante's recurring nightmare. Speaking of it to Plante would only identify Caveretta as the enemy. Mentioning it to Starkweather would tip Caveretta's hand all the way around.

It appeared he would have to give it up, tell the distressed Mrs. Plante that without any evidence to support her suspicions, there was nothing, really, he could do for her. He'd mull it all over through the evening and, if no hunches came, he'd give her the bad news in the morning.

IN THE MORNING, it was Mrs. Plante who called him. Vy Smythe had found time to write her first letter to them from Kansas City. Her tone did not sound totally light-hearted. He'd best come over and read it for himself, she told him.

It was a long letter, full of froth and optimism about their new home in a Kansas City suburban tract, about the kids and their new school, about Augie's new job. The letter was penned over three days, with headings to note the day and time when the writing was again taken up.

Through five pages Caveretta

saw nothing that might have warranted an urgent morning phone call. Until he reached a portion *'FRIDAY EVENING -10 p.m.'*

It was written under stress, the pen's point pressed down with more power, the handwriting more frenetically scribbled.

My thoughts are running ahead of me now, Raye. Or behind me. God, I don't know which. But I need your help and there is nowhere else I can turn. Last night, about six p.m., a very important Kansas City businessman was found shot to death in a restroom at the airport. No one witnessed the shooting. The restroom was one of the smaller, auxiliary ones, down a corridor which leads to a small patch of parking lot. The police think the dead man was taken there by force, because his car was found parked in a larger parking area in an opposite direction. The body was discovered by a lobby maintenance man who'd gone into the restroom to change the linen in the towel dispensers.

Saturday evening—8 p.m.—Tonight is Augie's bowling night at Rainbow Lanes and I did some laundry and ironing. This sounds crazy and may mean nothing but I'm

going to tell you anyway, Raye. I was putting away some of Augie's shorts when I found it. It was beneath a pile of handkerchiefs. It was a pistol. Raye, Augie never told me he owned one and if he'd had it all this time, I'm sure I would have come across it. The barrel smelled of sulphur. I'm not sure, but doesn't that mean a gun has been fired recently? I think so. Anyway the man murdered at the airport was shot with a 9-millimeter French automatic pistol. The pistol indicated they thought it was some sort of business killing dressed up to look like an international conspiracy.

'I know absolutely nothing about guns, Raye, and I couldn't take the pistol out of the house without Augie finding it missing. But I had to find out about it, you see, because there were no markings to tell what type of gun it was. So what I did was take a photo of it with our ten-second flash-camera.

'Monday—Noon—Just returned from a gunshop downtown, Raye, and I'm more concerned than ever. I checked my photograph against the guns displayed in the shop until I found one that nearly matched Augie's, and then asked a clerk the

caliber and type of the one on display. He said it was a 9-millimeter French automatic. I'm scared, Raye.

Our daily newspaper here printed a color photograph of the type of pistol the police think was used in the killing. It appeared in Sunday's paper. Raye, it is almost identical to the pistol I found in Augie's dresser drawer! I shouldn't be thinking this, but God, Raye, the implications are undeniable, especially in light of the fact that at the time of the murder, Augie was totally unaccounted for, missing from both the house and his office. Raye, I think Augie may have murdered that businessman in the airport and I also think it's somehow all tied up with that Mr. Starkweather."

'Raye, I'm nearly out of my mind with fear and indecision, and I can't think what to do! Should I go to the police with what I suspect? Should I confront Augie with what I know? Or should I simply chalk all this up to wild imaginings and forget I ever got all these silly notions into my head? Raye, you have to advise me. The distance between yourself and the event will make you more objective than I ever could. And I need an answer soon . . .'

Caveretta had studied enough criminological theory and had gleaned considerably from Lieutenant Kile to know that in the absence of hard facts, evidence or witnesses to fill in all the gaping blanks, reasoned supposition had to begin. You supposed and supposed and supposed until your supposing began to ring with the truth of what *might have happened*.

"Write her back and tell her to say nothing to anyone about her suspicions," Caveretta told Mrs. Plante.

"*Nothing?*"

"Not until I have a chance to talk all this out with someone."

"With someone? With whom?"

"With myself," Caveretta told her.

CAVERETTA did his best thinking in two quite divergent ways. When the weather was fine, he walked along Ocean Beach. When the weather was foul, he tossed agreeable Scotch whisky onto his palate in search of a golden buzz that nearly always made his brain operate in a fine free association of ideas.

For the remainder of that dismal, drizzly morning, he took to the whisky route. At first it went badly. Always, a part of his supposition became

misfitted. And he had to begin again. Failure. And again. And yet another failure.

And then, near two p.m., as the heavens tossed down a deluge of rain, a new idea made its introduction. *Omega*—now, that seemed a vaguely inconsistent name for a firm dealing in statistics. It hit no mark at all. It failed miserably to dramatize what Starkweather had to sell. *Omega*—the 24th letter of the Greek alphabet, the final letter. *Omega*—poetically, the last of anything, the completion of an act, the end to something. *Omega*—death!

Was this psychotic poetry? Was Starkweather, despite his outward demeanor of dignity and cordiality, a man deeply involved in death?

Caveretta saw no reason to abandon this line of thinking. He'd got himself into deeper water the past five hours—what was one more drowning more or less?

He turned his mind to the matter of Ollie Plante's nightmares, to the paper he wished he had not signed. What sort of document might that have been? Had Augie Smythe signed a similar document before him? And had its signing anything to do with his sudden relocation in Kansas City?

Had he, in fact, been the murderer of the businessman in

the Kansas City airport? But these men were social cripples, capable of only marginal successes. Hired killers? Hired by Starkweather? Cripples? Ah, but when one corners a cripple, it is wise to keep a wary eye out for his crutch.

Caveretta went back to the paper Ollie Plante seemed to have signed against his better judgment. Was he contracting to murder? No, there was no way Starkweather could have used the document against Ollie Plante legally, were he to break the agreement. What then? What power was contained in such a document?

And then it fell into place. What more powerful document than a *confession* of murder? A confession to a murder done *previously*? Done by someone else?

Stringing out this supposition was close to the impossible, with a dash of the preposterous. It meant supposing Starkweather was the engineer behind *several* killings, behind *many* killings, with each contracted murderer kept to his contract for the next by formally admitting guilt to the previous crime. It seemed an outlandish premise—that Starkweather was accepting contracts for killings and then jobbing them out at tremendous profits for himself.



Yet, bizarre as it seemed, all the suppositions dovetailed perfectly! *That* was the special nightmare hovering above the life of Ollie Plante like the darkest cloud in the sky. He had contracted with Mr. Starkweather to murder, same as Augie Smythe had done. And Starkweather's insurance for the fulfillment of that obligation was Plant's signature on a full confession to the *previous* killing! It was an infallible, unbroken chain to which Starkweather was affixing the links!

Caveretta was going to keep

Raye Plante clear of all of this just as long as humanly possible.

Somewhere he'd jotted down the name of the physician who was treating little Ollie Plante. Caveretta was high but he wasn't drunk. He flipped the pages of his battered little notebook lazily. Yes, there it was—Doctor Drummond, Sisters of Mercy.

He revealed to Drummond only enough of what he suspected to show the situation might become very serious. Then he asked to know something of the costs the Plantes had incurred from their son's illness.

"Do you want a to-the-penny figure, Mr. Caveretta? If you do, it will take some time for the hospital's business office to put it together."

"I just need a round figure," said Caveretta.

"It's over five thousand, I'm sure of that. I recall seeing something like that amount about a week ago when Mr. Plante called to set up a payment schedule. He sounded very optimistic about a large initial payment."

That statement sent a shock through Caveretta, because it meant Ollie Plante's contracted killing might be coming close on the heels of Augie Smythe's.

"How long will the boy be

hospitalized?" Caveretta asked the doctor.

The sign which fell across the line was one of either resignation or deep sadness. "Quite some time, Mr. Caveretta. A year—perhaps more."

There was a quality in the doctor's voice Caveretta was not reading. And then he was reading it and the reading made him grow sick inside.

"Ollie Junior's stomach cancer is terminal, isn't it, Dr. Drummond?"

"The father doesn't know, Mr. Caveretta. He'll have to be told, of course. Just when—well, we'll face that issue when it needs to be faced."

They spent a long moment in silent eulogy to a dying little boy.

"The worst of it is down the road," said Dr. Drummond. "The antibiotics, the pain-killers. What seems like a major expense now will pale by comparison."

Ollie Plante didn't know it yet, but Caveretta did—these unanticipated expenses would force Plante into multiple murders to keep pace with the hospital bills.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, Raye Plante received a long-distance phone call from her friend, Vy Smythe, in Kansas City. She needed someone to talk to. She

was heartbroken and contemplating suicide. The previous evening, while crossing a downtown Kansas City avenue, her husband had been run down by an automobile and killed. Not hit. Not struck. Run down. It was very clear. Augie Smythe had murdered the businessman in the airport restroom—and now Mr. Starkweather had had Augie Smythe killed to eliminate a source of possible embarrassment to him.

They talked for over an hour. After Raye Plante put up the phone, she picked it up again, called the Kansas City police and expressed her concern. Twenty minutes later, the Kansas City police called her back to inform her that Vy Smythe had already wolfed down the pills by the time her call had been placed to Raye Plante in San Francisco, a veiled cry for help. It saved her life.

"Does Ollie own a pistol or a rifle? A firearm of any kind?" Caveretta spoke softly to Raye Plante.

"He bought one last week. Because of the neighborhood. He showed me how to load and fire it."

Caveretta knew he was treading tenuous ground. He wasn't about to put Raye Plante through any ordeals. But on the other hand, he des-

perately needed to know certain facts.

"Do you know where he keeps the pistol?" he said.

"In the drawer of our nightstand in the bedroom."

"I need to know one other thing about the pistol, Mrs. Plante. Is there a slender black cylinder, about three inches long, with screw threads at one end?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact there is. But Ollie didn't tell me about that. What is it, Mr. Caveretta?"

Silencers were used by two types of killers—premeditated murderers and hired assassins.

"It's simply a device to increase the accuracy of the shot," Caveretta lied. "Mrs. Plante, will you do me one other favor. Go and see if the pistol is there now? In the nightstand drawer?"

"I'm going right now."

She seemed to have run both ways. She was out of breath and Caveretta could read the fright rising in her. "It's gone! And the black cylinder thing, too."

"Did your husband come home this afternoon?"

"At noon. He always comes home for lunch."

"When was the last time you noted the pistol's presence?"

"I can't really remember."

"All right," said Caveretta,

too urgently, he thought. It was the tension. It magnified the effect of everything spoken or done. "Was he going back to the Omega Service office?"

"No. Ollie said he was scheduled to do some statistical collection at the World Trade Center on the Embarcadero, near the Heliport."

Caveretta recognized the unconscious slip immediately. "Those were his *exact* words? He said, 'near the Heliport'?"

"Yes. It struck me as odd. I mean, the heliport is *four blocks* from the Trade Center, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Caveretta told her.

"Mr. Caveretta, I want to know what Ollie is involved in. I have a *right* to know. I am his wife and I love him in a very special way and before I saw him hurt, I'd take any pain or hurt in his place."

"I can't tell you anything definite, Mrs. Plante, because I still haven't anything definite to go on. Now, please, Mrs. Plante. We're wasting precious time. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

The heliport—was that where Ollie Plante's first murder would take place? Had Starkweather already arranged it, already set it into motion?

He called Kile and told him what he knew and what he

suspected. Kile usually bought most of Caveretta's hunches because Caveretta had a knack for putting together assumptions and possibilities when there was not much else. Kile was buying this time, too. He told Caveretta he'd meet him at the heliport in fifteen minutes.

The Heliport was a scaled-down airport set out on a good-sized square of concrete, pier-like, on the gray lip of San Francisco Bay. Its glass-bright mini-terminal had a flight reservations desk, a nice-sized waiting room with orange plastic chairs, food and drink machines and a cigar and magazine stall. A rent-a-car counter did a flourishing businessman's trade throughout the day.

Its eight helipads carried a constant flow of passengers to the city's core from San Francisco International Airport, whisking them in above the creep and snarl of automobile traffic in four minutes flat—sending out and receiving a fluttering concert of trade to and from nearby spots like Oakland, Lake Tahoe, Reno, Muir Woods, San Rafael and the myriad of rooftop stops at suburban and outlying corporations.

Caveretta met Kile out on a rain soaked street, and they went inside. Caveretta showed him a wallet-sized photograph

of Ollie Plante. They had the slim possibility of recognizing Plante while he could not identify them. At best, the edge seemed marginal.

The lobby of the heliport was not overly crowded. The weather's foulness seemed to have cut short air jaunts to the bone.

"I don't see him," said Lieutenant Kile. "And he can see us."

"He doesn't know us, Kile."

"Fine. I dress like a cop and you dress like David Janssen. *Anybody* would know us."

Next to the rent-a-car desk was a dark opening indicating a small cocktail lounge. They checked it out but Ollie Plante wasn't there. Of the six small tables, only one was occupied, by two businessmen whose heads were close together in quiet conference.

"You figure an amateur like Plante might want to steel his courage with a little liquor first," said Kile. "After all, wasting another human being isn't exactly like writing a letter to your sister."

Caveretta showed the photo of Ollie Plante to the bartender. His shift, he told Caveretta, began at ten a.m. And he never forgot a face. The face in the photo hadn't been in the lounge all day.

The windows of the lounge looked out on the helipads,

which continued to be blasted by strong winds and rain. One copter was on the pad, emitting passengers, and a second could be seen floating in across the bay. Three men carrying attache cases were moving from the landed helicopter into the building, unescorted—not another human around.

"At least he hasn't put it to anybody yet," said Kile. "You think one of these three?"

"No. He doesn't want witnesses. His hit will be alone. Or it will be a case of another time and another place. But let's get back out into the lobby, anyway. Plante's not a pro at this. You never know."

Ollie Plante was still not to be seen in the lobby. The trio of businessmen stopped for a rental car and left the building.

"So where is he?" Kile said.

"No idea," said Caveretta. "But one thing we know. He won't try to drop anybody out there in the open, on the helipad. He knows he's got a helicopter pilot for a witness, plus maintenance crews. His route of escape is too long. Plunging into the bay is out and he's got to come back through the building, get to his car or arrange for a cab or take off running."

From the lobby, two slender wings of corridor flared out. They led to parking lots and

side exits, and to restrooms. Caveretta wasn't forgetting how Augie Smythe had been murdered.

"Two restrooms," he told Kile. "Which one you want to check?"

"South," said Kile.

They split up. Caveretta crossed the sparsely occupied lobby, north, and moved into the finger-corridor. Past a door marked MAINTENANCE, past another indicating No ADMIT-TANCE, past a third marked WOMEN.

At the fourth door, labeled MEN, he plunged in without trepidation. There was no need for caution—Ollie Plante didn't know Caveretta from a gum machine.

THERE HE WAS. In front of a mirror above a sink, coolly combing blonde hair styled in the \$15 fashion. Plante wore his business suit. He blended well—a soon-to-be professional killer.

Caveretta moved in at the adjacent sink and began washing his hands. The kid was looking at his watch too frequently to make it a harmless gesture. Caveretta's mind's eye saw the helicopter incoming across the bay. They were about to meet formally.

"Augie Smythe is dead, kid," Caveretta said as the warm wa-

ter mixed with soap in his hands and made a weak lather.

The eyes snapped up into the mirror. They hooked on Caveretta's, tried to pull away but couldn't.

"After he killed the guy in the airport in Kansas City. Run down by a car. He was crossing a city street. He never knew what hit him."

The face twisted, trying to place it in his memory. It couldn't.

"There's a man out there someplace, kid. Maybe in the heliport lobby, maybe not. But he's on your case. One of Starkweather's emissaries, kid. Flat on your case. Next week, next killing, you're a dead cookie."

"Augie? Dead?" the voice fought for control, for some equilibrium in an unsettling situation. Another look was sneaked at his watch. "How do you know that, Mac? Just who the hell are you?"

"Is he due in on the next helicopter, kid? Nine-millimeter with a silencer. When you blow him, you better have that piece up against flesh. You bringing him back here, kid, to the restroom? Is that the way Starkweather wants you to pull it?"

Caveretta had soaped his hands. That was the blunder. Ollie Plante pulled back from

the sink suddenly and jerked out the pistol.

"Look, I don't know who you are and I don't give a damn. I got a sick kid and a lot of bills and a job of work to do this afternoon. Turn around and put your hands up."

Caveretta was grateful for the fact it was a small pistol. Ollie Plante came down on the back of his head three times, but Caveretta had enough sense to begin falling with the first blow. He was stunned but not out cold. The kid was a fool to leave him semi-conscious like that. But the Plante kid had been a fool all his life.

Caveretta was on his feet almost before the door hissed pneumatically closed. Quickly he wiped his hands dry, pulled out his .38 and heaved through the door. Plante could be seen down the corridor and Caveretta thought he could hear copter blades idling in a soft whirl. The kid had his nine-millimeter drawn and held inconspicuously down the line of his right side.

Caveretta spotted Lieutenant Kile on the far side of the lobby. He'd made Ollie Plante, too. They closed in. One of them had to drop the kid before he became a killer. They had the kid frozen in a cross-fire that could get all three of them killed. A sudden shot boomed

through the lobby and Caveretta hit the floor.

Ollie Plante's body went stiff as if it had been shocked by electrical current. He took two animated steps, his legs moving like stocks. Caveretta saw Kile spin his attention to the right and the heliport's front door. He fired two quick shots out of Caveretta's range of view. No fire was returned and Kile was sprinting in that direction now, yanking out handcuffs as he went.

Caveretta saw Ollie Plante dying. He turned him on his side to let the blood spill from his mouth, to speak if he wanted, if he could, if he had time.

The man Kile had fired on was wounded in the shoulder and the flesh of his left side. All the wrong people seemed to be dying.

Caveretta put his mouth to Ollie Plante's ear and said, "Plante, you're dying. You *have* to know that."

The lips twisted. "Tell me something else that isn't news. I been dead since I was born. I—it ain't no big deal."

"You've heard of deathbed testimony. I'm not a cop. But somebody has to be told. Otherwise there's no period at the end of your life."

"It was for my kid. My kid is sick. Money. You do the options

you got. You just do them and if it turns out to be medicine, you take that, too. Guys like me, there just aren't a lot of ways to make money"

"This Starkweather. Did he hire you to murder?"

"Yes, he did that. But I didn't have no gun at my head. Except what I signed."

"And Augie Smythe, too?"

"He killed a man named Oprea," said Ollie Plante. "In Kansas City. Mine was this guy. Bettinger. They don't tell you why. You don't really want to *know why*. It's all meat, anyway. We're all meat."

"Starkweather's killings. They go back quite a ways, isn't that right?"

"Years," said Ollie Plante. "Miss Peabody. The receptionist. She knows where all the records are kept. It's phantom stuff to her. She doesn't know anything."

Caveretta looked toward the front door of the heliport. The man Ollie Plante was to have killed wasn't getting away. Kile would see to it. He wanted this one traced all the way back.

Ollie Plante coughed. His system was beginning to malfunction now, sending up messages of death. "My kid," he mumbled close to Caveretta's ear. "You see my kid is all right. Operations. Maybe I got insurance for it from the engineers union. You're a stranger to me. But I helped you out. Now you got to promise to help me."

Nothing could have made Caveretta tell Ollie Plante they were both dying, both father and son. Entering his own death, Ollie Plante deserved the knowledge that the lives he cared about most would still go on. A stranger helping another stranger.

"I promise, Plante," he told him. "I'll see to it that your boy is all right. I'll look into the insurance—everything."

"We're all meat anyway, stranger," said Ollie Plante. "It's just a question of which of us ends up on the hook."

Then Ollie Plante slept in the arms of his own omega. With his fingertips Caveretta drew the lids over his eyes.

Next Month's Feature Stories—

A TIME TO KILL by TALMAGE POWELL
BLOOD ON THE SNOW by HERBERT HARRIS
THE DOG by PAULINE C. SMITH

YOUR CHOICE

Ryder should have known better than to cheat with a demolition expert's wife.

by
JACK
FOXX



DREW LAY ON his stomach on the thickly-grown slope overlooking his hunting cabin. Through the telescopic sights on the 30.06, he watched Carl Ryder's small compact enter the clearing below. Shifting position slightly, he checked his watch. Eleven o'clock. Ryder, as always, was punctual.

The compact pulled around to the rear of the cabin, where Drew had parked his own car. Minutes later, Ryder appeared, his immaculately combed blond hair unmoved by the thin morning breeze. In one hand he carried his deer rifle in its leather case.

Ryder crossed to the cabin and stepped up onto the log-railed porch. Drew had left the door ajar, and Ryder paused there for a moment. Then he put his head around the jamb.

Drew knew he was calling out, but there would be, of course, no answer.

When Ryder had gone inside, Drew lowered the 30.06 and took the walkie-talkie out of the case on his belt. He waited for a time, to allow Ryder to have a look around the cabin and to help himself to the Scotch. Then he flipped the *talk* button on the walkie-talkie.

"Carl," he said. "Carl, can you hear me?"

The sound of his voice crackling through the other walkie-talkie in the cabin would have surprised Ryder, Drew thought. He would be looking about, wondering where the voice had come from.

"Here, Carl," Drew said. "On the mantel above the fireplace."

He waited, giving Ryder a chance to approach the stone

hearth and take down the second walkie-talkie, a twin to the one in Drew's hand. Finally he said again, "Can you hear me, Carl?"

"Yes, I can hear you," Ryder's voice said. "What the hell, Lloyd? Where are you?"

"On the slope above the cabin," Drew told him. "I watched you drive up."

"What are you doing up there?" Ryder asked. "Come on down, Lloyd."

"I think I'll stay where I am."

"Do you want me to come up?"

"No. Just step over to the window."

"What for?"

"Step over to the window, Carl."

Drew lifted the 30.06 again and peered into the sights. He could see Ryder at the window. "All right," Ryder said, "I'm here. Now what's going on?"

"There's a potted plant on the porch railing," Drew said. "Do you see it?"

"I see it," Ryder said. Drew sensed irritation in his voice and smiled.

"Keep your eyes on it."

Carefully, Drew shifted the sights on the 30.06 to the potted plant. When he had it between the crosshairs he squeezed the trigger. He watched it explode, sending fragments of earthenware and a

shower of dirt against the cabin wall.'

Drew returned the sights to the window in time to see Ryder recoil, backing away into the room. "Damn it, Lloyd, have you gone crazy?" Ryder's voice shouted. "What the hell do you think you're doing? That bullet could have come inside the cabin!"

"And hit you?" Drew said. "No, Carl. I'm an expert shot. You should know that."

"Then what's the idea?"

"I just wanted you to know that I'm where I say I am," Drew said. "And that I've got my rifle with me—the one with the telescopic sights."

Ryder didn't answer when Drew released the *talk* button. The first vestiges of doubt would be beginning to touch his mind now, Drew thought. He would be sweating, wondering if Drew knew about the affair between him and Moira . . .

"Carl," Drew said at length, "why did you suggest we meet up here for the weekend? Oh, I know what you told me yesterday. You thought it'd be nice if we got together for a little hunting. But that's not the real reason, is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Lloyd."

"Don't you? Moira and I had a long, enlightening talk last night. Very enlightening."

Drew gave Ryder a chance to answer, but again there was no response. He went on, "Did you take me for a fool, Carl? I'm not—no way. I knew from the start that Moira had taken a new lover. She's had several since we've been married. But there's almost thirty years difference in our ages, and I've always made allowances in the past, always been patient. I'm really a reasonable man."

"Lloyd, you're wrong," Ryder said, and there was a slight whine in his voice. "There's nothing between Moira and me."

Drew smiled. "There's no point in trying to deny your involvement, believe me. I knew almost from the beginning that you were the one. Moira isn't very good at deception. She'd remind me time and again to 'invite that nice executive assistant from your office' whenever we planned a dinner or cocktail party. And the way she'd look at you on those occasions—those looks were pretty easy to interpret."

Silence from the walkie-talkie.

Drew said, "I did nothing about the two of you for the simple reason that Moira would have tired of you in time, as she's tired of all her lovers. That would have been the end of it. But just lately I began to remember certain things about

you, Carl. I began to remember how ruthless you can be, how ambitious.

"In business, those traits are admirable. But suppose, I said to myself, Carl wanted to get to the top *now*, without any delays. The prize is certainly big enough: Moira, and full control of Drew Explosives, a million-dollar corporation. You could have both, couldn't you? If only I were dead."

"That's ridiculous, paranoid," Ryder said, but his tone was unconvincing—and tinged now, Drew thought, with fear.

"You know what I think, Carl?" Drew said. "I think you suggested this weekend so you could commit murder. *My* murder."

Silence . . .

Drew imagined Ryder sweating, hand slick around the walkie-talkie, beginning rapidly to lose his usual composure. The image was a pleasing one. He said, "Moira admitted your affair last night, everything but the sordid details. She's never been able to lie to me successfully, at least for any lengthy period.

"She also told me about certain actions of yours, certain things you let slip in conversation, that hinted to me, if not to her, the kind of thing you were planning. Then there was your suggestion of the hunting trip,

the first such trip you've ever proposed in the three years you've worked for me. I've always had to goad you into coming with me in the past. You should remember that.

"So you see, I know exactly what your plans were. A hunting accident, of course. It happens all the time. The annual forest tragedy. But I had no proof, which meant I couldn't go the police. I thought of reversing your little scheme—shooting you before you could shoot me, making it look like the same kind of accident. That would have been a nice little ironic touch. But there existed the possibility, even though I would be wary, that you might still be able to shoot *me* before I shot *you*. I couldn't take that risk, could I?"

"It took me a while, but I came up with another idea. As you know, I've always been humane. I don't believe in wanton murder, and that's why I give any animal I hunt a sporting chance. I'm going to give you that same chance, Carl. I'm going to give you a chance you never would have given me."

Drew released the *talk* button once more, and Ryder said immediately, "Listen, for God's sake, Drew!" The words were shrill, full of terror. Ryder was beginning to panic. "Come down here and let's talk this

out. We can talk it out, can't we?"

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," Drew said. He let a few seconds pass, maintaining control of the walkie-talkie. Then, "All right, Carl—here's the situation. You can't leave the cabin. There's only one door, and as you may or may not have noticed, I've shuttered the windows in both bedrooms and the trophy room.

"They're steel-locked from the outside and impossible to batter down. The only exits are through the front window or the front door, and I have a clear view of both from my position. If you try to leave by either one, I'll shoot you. I couldn't possibly miss from here.

"Now listen and listen carefully. I've planted an explosive charge somewhere beneath the floor of the cabin, in one of the four rooms, where you can't possibly get at it from inside. The charge is so located that three of those four rooms will be totally destroyed by the explosion. The other room, because of the location and gauged smallness of the charge, will offer a maximum of protection from the blast.

"Of course, there's a chance that a man in that particular room would be killed anyway. I don't have to tell you that col-

lapsing walls and fragmentation are things which can't be predicted. But the room I'm talking about is the only one of the four where a man could possibly survive the explosion.

"You're one of the top men in Drew Explosives, Carl. You're an expert, and you know the field as well as any man, almost as well as I do. Given enough time, you could probably figure out the exact location of the charge in order for it to do what I say. I doubt if three minutes is enough time, but that's all I'm going to give you. Three minutes, and I detonate the charge.

"If you make the right decision, and the odds are only three to one against you, and if you survive, you have my word that I won't take further action. In fact, I'll pay you the sum of

fifty thousand dollars, providing, naturally, that you agree to corroborate my explanation to the authorities of an accidental explosion of a supply of dynamite I keep on hand for blasting tree stumps. In any case, it would be my word against yours—and I think you realize which of us carries the more weight in this county."

Drew smiled, thinly. "And that, Carl, is the sporting chance I'm offering you."

"*You're insane!*" Ryder screamed.

"Maybe," Drew agreed. "But if I am, it's men like you—and a woman like Moira—who made me that way." He rested his hand on the plunger of the detonating box at his side, and held his watch up to his eyes. "Three minutes—four rooms. Your choice, Carl."

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APRIL 1976



CHASE THE QUEEN

*Marty was a shark among sharks,
but when the take got fat enough
the shark became mark-easy mark.*

by GEORGE WARREN

I CUT THE CARDS. The phone rang. McEwen gave me a glum look and lumbered over to the bar. He kept his eyes on me as he picked up the phone.

"Idle Hour." He grimaced, the whole of his rubber face turning downward. "Banks? No, he ain't here." The eyes looked over at me. There was no ex-

pression in them at all. The eyebrows went up and down in an attitude of scorn and disdain.

"And you can tell that S.O.B. to stay away, too. You see him, you tell him for me, hey? Unless he pays his bills, maybe. Tell him I said...." He pulled the phone away from his ear, making a face at it. "Okay," he said, hanging up. "So suit yourself."

He came back to the table. "Anybody important?" I said, showing him a trick shuffle as he sat down.

"Bills," he said. "Somebody's got a marker of yours." I dealt him a hand, face up. Five queens, including two in spades. "Turn 'em over," I said.

He flipped them. "Far be it from me to spoil your childish pleasure." He cut them, then cut them again. Then he laid them out, one through five, face down. "Did I do right?"

"I guess so," I said. Somebody came in the door, bringing bright summer light into the dark bar. A flash of skirts, blonde hair. McEwen craned his thick neck.

"Christ!" he said. He got up and went out to the bar again. I let the cards lay. I dug the *Racing Form* out from under the chair and had a look at the day's lineups.

The marker was no trouble. I

could pay it right now. I'd hit nicely on a little job up in Petaluma. Money wasn't the problem. I was bored. I had nothing at all to do but sit on my kiester and do lousy card tricks, and I was bored to death.

I looked at my hands. I needed a manicure. I was thinking of going to the barber shop in the hotel next door for something to do. *What the hell*, I thought, holding up my mitts and looking at them. *It ain't going to make them look any prettier.* They were long and stringy and clumsy-looking, like the rest of me—a mark's hands.

They'd made me a lot of dough, looking like that.

There were a couple of pigs running up at Golden Gate Fields, but I didn't even feel up to phoning in a bet. I folded the paper apathetically and watched McEwen and the girl.

"Naw," McEwen was saying. "That bastard knows better than to show his face around here."

The girl picked that moment to look my way. She was about five-five and dressed kind of San Francisco nice—casual but planned. She had a nice wide-open face with wide-set eyes. Her wide mouth developed a nice smile as I looked at it. There was something familiar about her.

"You know, you're pretty good," she said over her shoulder to McEwen. "I was ready to leave. Hello, Mr. Banks," she told me in a friendly voice. "I'd know that lantern jaw and trick mustache anywhere." She came up to my table, holding her purse before her, and the smile grew wider.

"Sit down," I said, rising halfway. "It seems I know you from somewhere, but I can't think where."

She sat. There was a nice sparkle in her eye. "You used to bounce me on your knee a few years ago, back with the Pappas and Kirby Shows. I'm Ed Fields's daughter, Edie."

"For God's sake." I sat up and gave her another look-see. I remembered Ed's kid all right, but how was I to know she'd grow up into a dish like this? I looked her over. "Well, I'll be damned. You can tell Ed I approve."

Her face darkened. "I wish I could say tell him yourself, but . . ." Even in the dim bar light I could see her knuckles stiffen on the purse handle. "He—he told me once that if I had a godfather, back on the P and K lot, you were it. He said if I ever got in trouble I should call on 'Three Card' Monte Banks." Her voice had a catch in it.

"You're in trouble?" I said.

"Ed's in trouble. My father. You see—well, Ed bought P and K a couple of years ago."

"That broken-down forty-mile ragbag? Well, I hope he did something with it. I stopped taking *Billboard* a couple of years back, but the ads haven't looked worth a damn since Pappas died."

"We were doing just fine, right up to—well, do you remember my kid brother? Eddie. Maybe you'd left the show by then. He's twenty now. Ed was grooming him to run the carny when he retired to Gibtown. Now . . ." She caught her breath.

I took her hand. "Go on."

"We hit a run of bad luck," she said. "A ride went bad and somebody took a fall. Our insurance was canceled. Then there was a fire. Even then we managed, somehow, but at tax time we needed a loan, bad, and we couldn't get one anywhere in the business." She looked me in the eye now, getting her stuff together, as if she expected me to call her a damn fool. "We went to Marty Shapiro."

"Ahhh!" I said, letting the wind out. "Damn fool."

"Yes," she said. "We didn't know anything else to do. And we could have paid it off on time, too. But first Eddie came down with polio and the hospi-

tal bled us dry, and then—then last week Ed had a stroke. He's in the University Hospital right now. He can move two fingers of one hand if he tries real hard."

"God almighty," I said. "Who's running the show?"

"I am," she said, a touch of pride in her voice. "I'm with it and for it. I'm a good carny girl. But I can't meet that note next Wednesday. And Marty says no extensions. He wants his pound of flesh. I don't know why he should do this to us. I mean, Ed helped him get started when he was a kid. Ed wrote off a loan just like this to Marty twenty-five years ago. I don't know what to think. What to do."

"Ah, me," I said, squeezing her hand as McEwen came up. There were people who just didn't play by your rules. They didn't figure you counted. "Meet Miss Fields," I said. "Daughter of an old friend. Got a problem. Owes some money to Shapiro."

He whistled. "She's got a problem," he agreed. "I wonder why people keep doing that. He's even crookeder than you are. How much?"

I lifted an eyebrow at her. "Ten thou is how much we're short," she said. "Due Wednesday and no extensions. The whole carny's security."

"You're gonna lose it," he said. He looked at me. "Unless?"

"Think he's good for thirty right now?" I said.

"Is Rockefeller good for oil?" he said. He reached down and turned his five cards over, face up; one by one. Five ducks, all of them the spit and image of Daffy himself—black ducks with rings around their necks and exasperated looks on their kissers. Duck of diamonds, duck of hearts, duck of clubs, duck of spades. And, for lagniappe, roast duck on a platter, black, with a ring around its neck.

She gave a choked little laugh and grabbed my hand.

"See what I can do," I said.

I STARTED GETTING in character halfway down the block from Marty's cardroom. I'm a long skinny drink of water anyhow, and all it takes is a little adjustment of stance to make me look downright stringy. Buying a Goodwill Industries coat two sizes too large makes me look positively tubercular, and those long sticklike fingers are quite convincing when I let 'em wobble like a man with the shakes.

I had one chance; Shapiro hadn't seen me in twenty years, either. Who knew what could have happened to me since the old days, running a PC joint—that's poker—on the Pappas and Kirby lot? Lots of water

under the bridge since then, and I'd kept a low profile in the trade.

I didn't recognize the bartender. Marty didn't pay well enough, I'd heard, to keep anybody long. They came and went, and I'd have been willing to bet that they ran true to type like this big ox here—extra large in the shoulders, even bigger in the tush. I walked up to the bar on Grade AA eggs, taking the greatest of care not to spill the imaginary bowl of soup balanced on my head.

"Do for you?" It didn't sound much like a question, and he went right on polishing glasses.

"Ahhh—coffee, please. I'm—heh—driving."

"On the wagon, huh?" He looked at my hands. They were barely under control.

"You—you might say that." I watched him pour the coffee. "And," I said, rolling the words out, "I'm looking for Mr. Shapiro."

"Oh?" He collected and gave me the once-over.

"Yes. You might tell him, if you would be so kind, that an—old friend wants to see him." I gave him an unconvincing smile, the kind that looks like cheap dentures.

"Which old friend? He's got lots of old friends."

I laboriously pulled out a card, one of the cheesy ones



with the dog-eared corners. This one said, *J. Montgomery Banks, Investment Counsellor*. Guaranteed to un-impress anyone, even the incurably credulous. And that wasn't an adjective anyone had hung on Marty in the time I'd known him.

He took the card. "Wait a minute," he said. He went over to the pay phone and dialed.

It was my chance to look around. Usual crummy joint, but a small amount of money—very small—had been spent on it lately. There must have been a tax advantage in that. Marty's rep was that of a man who spent money only to make money or save money. Same turn-of-the-century ceiling fan, cleaned up a bit, perhaps. Old bar, but new stools, done up in ugly colors from different second-hand stores. New brass ceiling lamps, hanging down low over new tables.

Not nice tables—bargain-basement junk. Three green ones and one orange. Just the right colors for a new coat of landlady robin's-egg blue on the walls. I shuddered, keeping in character, and turned around just in time to see my shudder draw a thoroughly superior-looking sneer from the barkeep, coming back from his phone call.

"Be out in a minute," he said.

There he came—five o'clock shadow, bald head, Al Capone jowls and resentful expression above a \$200 suit that didn't fit, with a distinctive yellow tie and one blue sock and one black sock. What kept me from mistaking him for an ambassador was the shoes. They looked like he'd played football in them. Twenty years fell away in my mind. I knew him all right. Last of the Big Spenders.

"Hiya," Marty," I said.

His expression didn't change much. "Banks? You wanted to see me? I'm busy."

"Sure you are," I said. "I know you are, Marty, but I'm thinkin' you ain't ever too busy to make a little money. Right? Right? Well, I got a pigeon for us? The fattest pigeon on the Coast, baby. You ought to see him."

"You got a pigeon?" he said. "Whatta you need me for?"

I refrained from saying whatta anybody need you for, you cheap grifter. "Got a problem, Marty. Got a pigeon, like I say, but I ain't got a stake. And Marty—it don't matter that he's the dumbest lintheaded Georgia cracker yokel you ever laid eyes on—I ain't the apple-cheeked boy I once was." I flashed the hands at him, trembling. "I just got out of the tank. I need a little leg up the ladder with this rube."

"So whatta you tellin' me this for?" he said. "I run a honest game here."

"Sure you do, Marty," I said, earnest but knowing, "when there ain't nobody manning that hole in the wallpaper up there behind the fan. Cute as a bug, baby. You always was. But old Monte still has an eye for a setup. See? The cheesecloth section that looks just like wallpaper under that crummy paint job? You couldn'ta done better if you'd painted angels on that damn ceiling."

"Okay." The expression still hadn't changed. "Who's the guy?"

"And what does his poke weigh—hey? Marty, the guy is loaded. Loaded. Take it from me." I waved those shaky mitts at him. And as I talked it up, warming up to the subject, I could see myself turning the tip, a little at a time. I watched

the dollar signs form behind those piggy little eyes. He'd let me take this mark, a jerk I couldn't take by myself without signals from Marty's house man, and then, slick as wax paper, Marty'd take me like Grant took Richmond.

With his wad behind me, I couldn't lose to anybody but another professional, and this was some rube from Atlanta who didn't know the score. The little peephole would set the guy up but good. Then, while I was all full of winning, Marty'd take me, the minute he got me back on the free sauce with a bottle of sneaky pete from the bar. Oh, it'd be a nice deal all around for him.

I gave him my sleazy smile—the loser one. You can't cheat an honest man.

The first two hours were pure lemonade. Mr. Humphrey Talcott, the turpentine heir from Atlanta, took me and a couple of guys Shapiro brought along for padding, for six thou or so before the crowd started building up or the padding started dropping off.

I let him carve the excess fat off the roll Marty had staked me with, pulling dumb stunt after dumb stunt, sucking him in. And I let Marty, up in the hole, have a gander at my hand every chance I got. It wasn't always easy. The hole was set



up to put the yokel on display more than me.

But I was true to my word. And I kept that dumb smile on

my kisser as the ring of kibitzers around us thickened, smiling hand after hand and folding hands that could have whipped Talcott easily. I could imagine Marty up there groaning, even though he knew it was nothing but lemonade. He was the type that hated to lose money even when he was winning.

Finally, with my own pile down by five figures, Marty's house shill gave me the nudge under the table. Time to take him—time to shoot out the lights. I gave him and Mr. Talcott a nice smile and started belting him with the goodie, watching the shill check to him, watching him give me a hard look and vacillate, just that little bit, just enough to let me see into his soul.

Oh, it was fun, watching that rube confidence on Talcott's face start to crack, a little at a time. And when a bet wasn't certain, Marty would push the button, up there in the hole, and the shill would get the signal—the little electric buzz through the chair leg—and he'd immediately play footsies with me under the table.

It wouldn't have fooled a Mongoloid baby. But it fooled Mr. Humphrey Talcott of Atlanta, the big turpentine man. And when the deal worked its way around to me, I knew I had my hand, my big go-for-broke

hand, at any time I wanted it. I let things go a couple more rounds. Lemonade, anybody? Five cents a glass. Then—I was beginning to wonder if Marty'd passed out from the suspense—I got that second, don't-look-now boot under the table. Okay.

I passed a guileless smile around the board; only four of us were left. I gave Talcott a cut and, like an amateur, he took one of those elaborate multiple cuts, fancier than the Old Shell Game. I gave him the indulgent side-of-the-mouth smile of a damn fool who is down by five figures and still thinks he can pull the rabbit out of the topper. Then I dealt the pasteboards like the Blue Fairy waving that wand.

Down and dirty they went, all of them. I knew what every card was. I knew before I looked at them that I had four cards to a royal flush in diamonds, missing only a queen. I knew the shill and the fourth party had garbage hands that would fold the minute anybody opened with anything. And I knew Talcott had two nines, two threes, and the jack of spades.

I smiled my dopey smile.

The shill checked. Talcott opened strong. The fourth chump folded and watched us. I raised Talcott five hundred bucks, and he faded me. Each

of us dropped a card. The shill thought about things and folded. It was down to bumping noses, and I gave Marty another look at my pasteboards. I waited for the kick, but I didn't get it. Not yet.

And I dealt Talcott his nine, and I gave myself a card, and I took my own sweet time picking the damn thing up while I watched him react. *Oh, Talcott, I thought. I can read you like the Sunday funnies.* I rubbed that last card between thumb and forefinger, playing it thoughtful and slow, before I picked it up and fanned my hand. The lady looked happily out into space.

Royal flush, Marty. I scowled at my hand. Then I gave him a look at them. Openers bet five thousand bucks, shoving the pile out at me with a big-knuckled hand. Talcott's glare was supposed to freeze me in my tracks. *How do I bet, Marty?* I looked at the five diamonds in a row. Nothing happened.

Then I felt it. He nearly drew blood on my shinbone.

"See you," I said, "and raise you." I shoved the whole pile out there. Then, for the sake of form, I counted it twice. "Gonna cost you to look at 'em," I said to him.

Talcott was sweating like a pig. He glared at his hand. He

bit his lip. Then, slowly, reluctantly, he counted out the missing amount and shoved it across the table at me. It's leave him a damn sight better than bus fare, but it was a hell of a big bet to fade. "Let's see 'em," he said, spreading the full house out before me.

I laid 'em out for everybody to see. I didn't need to look at the cards. I knew what they were. Ace of diamonds, king of diamonds, jack of diamonds, ten of diamonds.

And queen of clubs.

"Hey!" the shill said, his eyes bugging.

I stood up and gave Talcott an angelic smile.

"Beats the hell out of me," I said. I picked my hat up at the door.

"He's gonna cut your gizzard out," McEwen said. He stood by the booth and watched Humper Talcott, Edie Fields and me divvying up the pile Marty and I had dropped.

"I should worry," I said. "He's gonna let everybody know about that peephole? Mack, he did it himself."

"It comes," Humper said in that rube twang of his, "to twelve thou apiece, Monte. I trust you and the lady haven't anything against a trifling amount of clear profit."

"Not me. Edie?"

"I've got a nice comfortable

Jewish hospital all picked out for Ed, where he'll feel at home. This'll help nicely." She looked up at me, one eyebrow out of drawing. "Where *did* that fifth diamond go, Mr. Banks?"

"Back to where it came from in the first place," I said. "On my thumb. Little dab of oil-base paint, bled onto the card through a diamond-shaped cut-out on the Band-Aid on my thumb. Enough to show Marty a diamond if he really wanted to see one bad enough. Wipe it on, wipe it off. Then wipe your thumb off, inside your pants pocket."

"But the queen of clubs has a black border," she said. "Queens of diamonds have red. It shouldn't be enough just to change the suit in one corner. How—"

"How's Marty gonna know that? He's completely color-blind. You ever see how he dresses? You ever see a card-room with three tables one color and the fourth another? He saw what he wanted to see, once the thought of all that dough in Humper's pile got to

him. He—well, I guess the mark in him took over.

The phone rang. McEwen went over to it, a sour look on his face. Talcott stacked the three piles, nodded at me, took his, gave Edie a courtly bow and went out.

"Well," I said, "that pays off two big bills coming due today." She raised an eyebrow. I nodded my head at the bar, the tables. "This dump. Mortgage." Her mouth made a surprised O. She got up to leave, pressing my hand and saying thanks like she meant it. Then she thought better of it and gave me a big kiss, right here where it counts. And she went out happy.

"No," McEwen was saying, "and I don't *wanna* see the lousy bastard neither. You can tell him from me if you see him. N-O—no. Banks ain't welcome here. And that goes for you, too, buster." He slammed the phone down.

"Same old business at the same old stand," he said. "Show me that bit with the ducks again, hey?"

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DU~~M~~ WITNESS

by MICHAEL MOORE

Fred's only weak spot was his love for Cristine—and Valenti was all too aware of his Achilles heel.



FRED STENNET didn't care a damn when Nicky Valenti threatened him with violence—he had been used to threats of violence in the twilight world which had spawned him. It was the danger to Christine that worried him. He would sooner lose his life than lose Christine. She was everything to him.

Stennet thought he'd seen the last of Valenti and his mob. They belonged to the past he wanted to forget.

Stennet had paid for his lapse from the straight and narrow. Three months. They had been lenient because of his clean rec-

ord. Next time, though, it wouldn't be so easy.

But there wasn't going to be a next time, thanks to Christine. She believed in him. "Get yourself a decent job and I'll marry you," she had said.

So he had, and she'd married him. Now there was going to be a kid, and that seemed to make her more precious than ever. And vulnerable. Nicky Valenti knew that.

"Remember, Stennet, if you fancy yourself as a copper's stoolie, my boys will know where to find you. Or they might drop on that little missus of yours. Right?"

He'd just love to "shop" Valenti, but the thought of what might happen if he did gave him nightmares. It didn't matter what they did to *him*. It was what might happen to Christine . . .

"Why don't we get together for a chat?" Valenti had said. "For old time's sake . . ."

Valenti had sounded different, changed. So he had gone to Valenti's new apartment, not very far away. It had been a ghastly mistake.

Stennet made his position clear enough. "Look, I'm out of it, see . . . It's behind me—understand?"

"I want to get out of it, too," Valenti had said. "Do you reckon your boss Joe Anderson could use me at the works?"

Well, Valenti was an engineer. A clever one. Anderson was crying out for skilled men. "Come to the works first thing in the morning," Stennet had told him. "Maybe they could use you."

How innocent could you get? Valenti only wanted to get in to be actually conducted to the office where all the money was.

Early Friday morning, too. And with Anderson getting the payroll-money out of the safe. Enough to make a cat laugh. Only it didn't turn out to be funny.

He might have known Nicky

Valenti would be carrying a gun.

But Joe Anderson wasn't chicken. The boss had a go—just the damned stupid kind of thing he would do.

That was how Anderson had died. From a heart attack when—in the act of throwing a fist at the payroll-snatcher—a bullet had torn through one of his shoulder-bones.

Almost murder by accident. But a killing all the same.

Fred Stennet wasn't sure what had been worse, the warning threats of the gunman he had unwittingly helped, or the ice-blue eyes that never seemed to waver in the aggressive plump face of Inspector Harland.

"There was just you and Anderson on the premises?"

"Yes . . . it was very early, see. Well, it's still early, isn't it?"

"You saw nobody come into the building?"

"Nobody."

Harland's eyes were accusing, angry. Muscles worked in the detective's pudgy cheeks.

"Where were you when Anderson got shot?"

"I was having a wash in the washroom."

Harland said grimly, "So you were having a wash in the washroom while your boss was getting murdered? You're tell-

ing lies, aren't you, Stennet?"

"No!"

"You're chicken, aren't you, chummy?" Harland went on. "You know who did it all right, but you're too yellow-bellied to put the finger on him. Who was it?"

"I've told you!" Stennet protested. "I never saw anyone and I don't know anything!"

"The Inspector said, "Get out of my sight."

Christine wasn't there when Stennet got home at lunchtime. This was strange. But what was more puzzling was the fact that there was nothing ready for him to eat.

Stennet had his hand on the door-handle all ready to go and question the woman in the adjoining flat when the 'phone rang.

"So you grassed, Stennet, after all?" a voice said. "You went to the station and told the fuzz who did it, didn't you, Stennet?"

"Who's that?"

"Not the Boss, I'm sorry to say. Just one of his helpers. You see, they came and picked the Boss up—after you called at the copper's shop a couple of hours ago . . ."

"I tell you I told them nothing!" Stennet shouted.

"Really? We don't believe you, Stennet. We've got your little woman. If anything nasty

should happen to the Boss, then something nasty could happen to Christine. The Boss did mention something like that, didn't he?"

Stennet was sweating again, his face pale. "Look . . . I can explain everything . . . You know I'll do everything I can to clear the Boss . . . Just let me come and explain . . ."

A pause. "All right, Stennet, you explain . . . you make your story real good, eh?"

Nicky Valenti's apartment was on the ground floor of a modern block. Stennet pushed the bell-bottom. The delay before the door was opened only served to fan the white heat of his rage.

Stennet found himself scowling at the face of Valenti himself.

"What do you want?" Valenti asked abruptly.

"Where is she? What have you done with her?" Stennet bellowed.

Valenti said uneasily. "Lower your voice, you bloody fool! You want the whole neighbourhood to hear?"

"Where's Christine? Where is she?"

Stennet tried to push past Valenti, but the latter hurled him back into the lobby with one hand, while his other hand reached for his pocket.

Stennet threw all his weight

behind the punch that connected crunchingly with the other man's chin. Valenti was literally projected back into the room as if propelled from a catapult. Then Valenti was on the floor, a very still and very untidy heap, with blood seeping from a gash in his face.

Stennet rushed into the flat. "Chris! Chris! Where are you?" he yelled out.

A calm voice behind him said, "It's all right, Stennet, she's not here—we've got her."

Stennet wheeled round to face Inspector Harland. Two C.I.D. men stood close behind him.

"She's at the Station," Harland said. "She's quite safe."

Stennet stared at him challengingly. "You followed me here?"

Harland nodded. "We did. You were too scared to name the man responsible for Ander-

son's death. So I got one of my chaps to ring you and say your wife was being held as a hostage. We guessed that you wouldn't stop to think . . . that you'd make a bee-line for the man we wanted . . . and you did!"

Stennet was frowning. "You seemed to be very sure I knew who robbed Anderson. What made you so sure?"

"You didn't want us to think you'd seen who did it. You pulled that phoney story about having a wash in the wash-room, soon after the works opened when there was just you and Anderson there. One of my sergeants was very puzzled—he wondered how you'd had a wash without wetting any of the basins or any of the towels . . ."

The Inspector faced Stennet squarely. "Come on, Stennet, let's have the truth . . ."

Next Month:

BLOOD ON THE SNOW

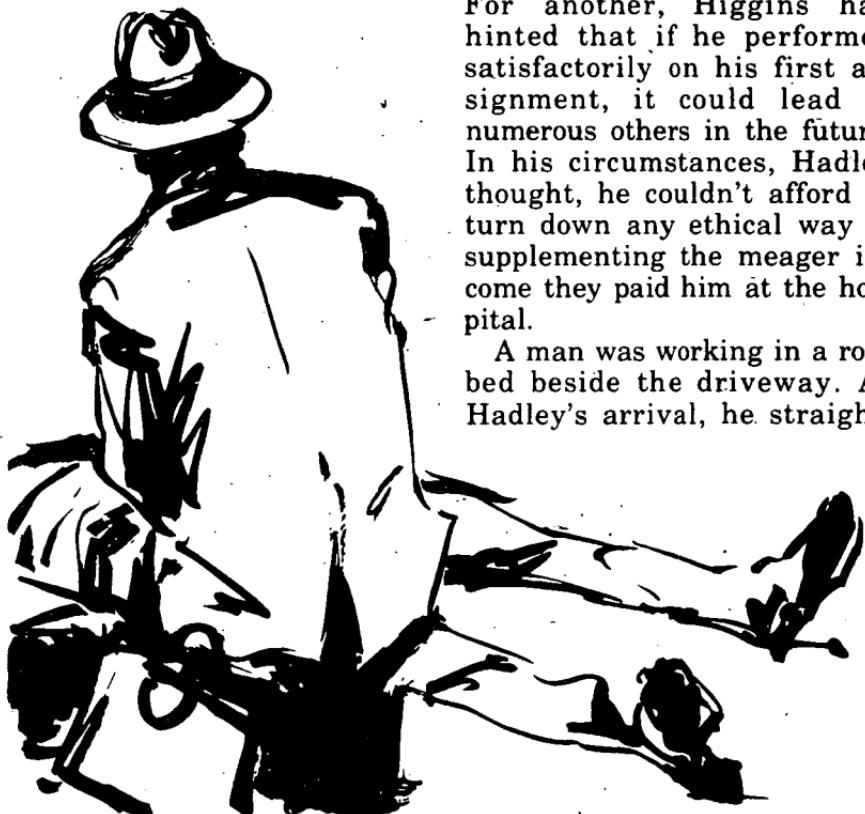
*Whoever said dead men tell no tales?
Not the victim in this stirring story.*

by HERBERT HARRIS

Is There a Doctor In the House?

by JAMES HOLDING

*Ignorance may be bliss,
but it may also lead to
involvement in a felony.*



AS HADLEY TURNED his car into the driveway, he felt understandably nervous. For one thing, this was the first time he'd done anything like this. For another, Higgins had hinted that if he performed satisfactorily on his first assignment, it could lead to numerous others in the future. In his circumstances, Hadley thought, he couldn't afford to turn down any ethical way of supplementing the meager income they paid him at the hospital.

A man was working in a rose bed beside the driveway. At Hadley's arrival, he straight-

ened up, a bull of a man, powerfully built. His hair was iron gray and very thick, neatly parted on one side. He had shoulders a yard wide, colorless eyes, a fleshy nose, a ruddy face engraved around the mouth with deep creases, and a dimple in his cheek when he smiled. He raised his eyebrows at Hadley and said, "Yes?"

"I'm Dr. Hadley. Are you Mr. Stanley Clemons?"

"I sure am," said Clemons. "Dr. Hadley, eh?" He dropped his trowel and came over to Hadley's car. "I've been expecting you ever since Social Security called me about the extra benefits I'm going to get."

"Mr. Higgins said you'd be expecting me."

"You could have knocked me over with a feather when Higgins called yesterday," Clemons said genially. "How about getting a break like that at my age? A hundred a month more Social Security if I can pass a routine physical! That's what I call a gift from heaven!"

Hadley got out of his car and said, smiling, "You equate heaven with the Social Security Administration?"

"You better believe it, Doc! Who else but God or a government bureau could get a doctor to make a house call these days?" Clemons laughed at his little joke. "Where you want to

examine me, Doc? My bedroom all right?"

"That'll be fine."

"Good," said Clemons, looking down at his muddy gardening shoes. "It opens right off the porch so I won't have to track dirt through the rest of the house. Come on in."

Clemons's bedroom was plainly furnished, had framed photographs from *Sports Illustrated* on the walls, a single bed, sketchily made, and an adjoining bathroom in spectacular disarray.

"You live here alone?" asked Dr. Hadley, putting his bag down on the bed.

"Yep. Ever since Minnie died three years ago. My wife. That's why I'm entitled to more social security money. This new amendment they passed in Washington gives widowers extra benefits, depending on their age. How many clothes you want off, Doc?"

"Might as well strip clear down, Mr. Clemons. I've got to give you a pretty thorough going-over."

Clemons began to strip. "How come?" he asked. "Mr. Higgins told me the examination would be routine."

"That's true. No electrocardiogram or blood tests. But pretty much everything else. It won't take long, though."

The removal of Clemons's

clothes revealed a remarkably muscular body. He gave Dr. Hadley a self-conscious grin and said, "I'm in perfect shape, Doc. You won't find anything to disqualify me for that hundred-a-month extra, I'm sure of that."

"Sit down on the edge of the bed," the doctor told him, "and we'll soon find out." He stuck a thermometer in Clemons's mouth and set about taking his blood pressure.

For twenty minutes, then, he concentrated on his examination to the running accompaniment, once the thermometer was removed from his patient's mouth, of numerous questions:

"How's it sound in there, Doc?"

"Okay. Say 'ninety-nine'. Again."

"What are you proving now?"

"Checking the glands under your jaws."

"My nose is okay, for God's sake!"

"Bent septum on one side. Nothing serious."

"What's over there, Doc? Where you're pressing?"

"Gall bladder."

"What's that funny-looking thing, Doc?"

"A tuning fork. Can you feel that vibration?"

And finally, "Routine examination! That's a laugh!"

"Half the men your age have

prostate trouble," Hadley said.

"Not me," said Clemons. Then he looked worried. "At least I never had any symptoms."

"Perfectly normal." Dr. Hadley went into the bathroom to wash his hands. "You can put your clothes back on, Mr. Clemons."

"Great!" said Clemons, beginning to dress. "Did I pass, Doc?"

Dr. Hadley came back into the bedroom and sat down on the edge of Clemons's bed. He made a business of replacing his instruments in his bag. Then, with a straight look at Clemons, he said, "I'm afraid I can't give you a clean bill of health, Mr. Clemons. My report to Social Security will probably disqualify you for that hundred-a-month extra. I'm sorry."

"What?" Clemons was flabbergasted. Then grew angry. "You mean there's something wrong with me? Something serious enough to...?" He paused, then went on indignantly, "Listen, I just had a physical by my own doctor a couple of months ago. He said I was in great shape!"

Hadley nodded. "You probably were. But not now. You've got an aortic aneurysm. Quite a large one. Just here, below your ribs. You can feel the swelling yourself." He reached out and

guided Clemons's hand. "Feel it?"

With the incredulous air of a man totally surprised, Clemons prodded and pressed his abdomen in the indicated area. "I don't feel anything!" he said. "It's just your imagination, Doc. What the hell is an aortic aneurysm, anyway?"

"This place in the wall of your aorta," Dr. Hadley told him. "The pressure of your blood blows it up like a balloon. If the pressure gets too great, the balloon bursts. Like a blow-out in a tire."

"And then what?" Clemons asked hesitantly. His face wasn't so ruddy now.

Hadley shrugged. "Then blooey," he said. "Curtains! Your aorta is your blood's main highway, you know."

Clemons's narrowed eyes, staring at Hadley, held dismay and skepticism in equal parts. "I don't believe it!" he insisted in a belligerent tone. "I bet you aren't even a regular doctor. Just some quack who works for Social Security to con me out of my hundred a month!"

Hadley rose to his feet. "I'm not a government employee," he said stiffly. "I'm doing this examination on a free-lance basis for Mr. Higgins, because the new amendment you mentioned has made physical examinations imperative for

hundreds of thousands of people as soon as possible, and Higgins has to get all the medical help he can muster to do the job."

"You in private practice then?" Clemons asked. His color was better now. "I never heard of you before, and I've lived here for forty years."

Hadley started for the door. "I'm sorry I have to give you a bad report. But I am a licensed doctor, Mr. Clemons. A resident physician at Memorial Hospital. And I intend to set up shop myself as a general practitioner as soon as I finish my residency."

Mr. Clemons, who had got only as far as shorts and socks in redressing himself, rushed after Hadley, caught him by the arm, and said humbly, "I apologize, Doc. Honest, I'm sorry. You caught me by surprise is all, see? I believe you about that thing you say I've got. How about telling me a little more about it before you go? Is there any cure for it? Can't I have an operation or something?"

Touched by the big man's plea, Dr. Hadley sat down in a worn bedroom chair and told him about aneurysms.

Hadley was in the midst of his trick in Emergency next day when an orderly told him a man was asking to see him in the waiting room.

"Who?" asked Hadley. "He give a name?"

"No name. Seemed to know you, though."

When Hadley went to the waiting room a few minutes later, Mr. Clemons rose from a chair to meet him. They shook hands. "Hello, Mr. Clemons," Hadley said. "You decide to do something about that aneurysm?"

"Yeah, Doc. I checked back with my own doctor this morning and you were right as rain. I've got it. I'm coming into the hospital tonight and my operation is scheduled for tomorrow at ten."

"Good," said Dr. Hadley. "No use fooling around with those things. It's nice of you to come in and tell me."

"Least I could do," said Clemons. "You got a minute to talk?"

"Sure." They sat down.

Clemons said abruptly, "You send in your report on me yet?"

Hadley nodded. "First thing this morning. But if your operation takes care of the aneurysm, I'll amend the report, of course."

"Who'd you send it to?"

"Mr. Higgins. I told you yesterday . . ."

Clemons interrupted. "Addressed to where?"

"The local Social Security office."

"Too bad—because there isn't any Higgins at the local Social Security office, Doctor."

"What!"

"Nor any new amendment that gives widowers a hundred a month extra, either. Don't you ever read the papers?"

"Not often," Hadley said, bewildered. "They keep me too busy around here. But . . . does that mean Mr. Higgins won't pay me for examining you yesterday?"

"How much did he offer you?"

"Fifty dollars."

"You'll never get it, Doc. Higgins was conning you. A one-night stand, so to speak, that's what he hired you for, because his regular 'doctor' happens to be in jail."

Hadley looked stunned. "I don't understand. You mean Higgins deliberately got me mixed up in a—a fraud of some sort?"

"Listen, Doctor," Clemons said, "you're a real innocent. You ever see this Higgins in the flesh?"

"No. He called me on the telephone."

"And it never occurred to you to check on him before you took the job?"

"Why should it? He sounded completely bona fide."

"Well, he wasn't. He's a crook. Running one of the slickest con games there is. Prey-

ing on gullible old people mostly. Look, Doctor, he calls up a carefully selected prospect, gives him a line about new social security benefits, or a cut in insurance premiums, of something else, if the prospect can pass a simple physical. Says he'll send a doctor so-and-so out to examine the mark at such and such a time. Did he tell you when to arrive at the house yesterday?"

"Yes, he did."

"See what I mean?"

"But why?" Hadley asked. "What's the purpose of all the examination rigamarole?"

The lines around Clemons's mouth deepened enough to make his dimple show. "You know what Higgins and two pals of his were doing while you were examining me in the bedroom yesterday?"

Hadley shook his head.

"Cleaning out the other rooms in the house. While you were taking my pulse and temperature, they were taking a color TV set, an expensive Japanese stereo, all the loose cash and jewelry they could pick up in a hurry, and a collection of Greek and Roman coins that is worth anywhere from fifteen to twenty thousand dollars."

Hadley gasped. "How do you know that?"

"Because I had the police

waiting half a block away to grab Higgins and his pals when they backed their pick-up truck full of stolen goods out of the driveway."

Hadley's eyes widened. "The police were waiting, you say? Does that mean you *knew* what was going on?"

"Sure. Everybody who isn't a complete innocent knows enough these days to call the Better Business Bureau or the police to check on anybody who telephones them about a sudden windfall."

Dr. Hadley, now almost as pale as his white medical smock, was silent for a long moment, thinking. Then he said, "If you knew it was a fraud and had arranged for the police to trap the thieves, how come *I* wasn't trapped, too, when I left the house?"

Clemons grinned again. "Because I had a hunch you were a real doctor, that's why. The genuine article, who wouldn't be caught dead in a set-up like that if you knew the truth. And besides—" he shivered slightly "—I *did* feel that swelling below my ribs you pointed out to me." He ran a blunt hand over his carefully-parted gray hair. "That cinched it."

"Why?"

"Because a con man playing a doctor would have passed me with flying colors and promised

me the hundred extra in my next check."

"I see," said Dr. Hadley very softly. He felt humiliated, shamed, frightened. And more than anything else, grateful. "If you hadn't kept me there in the bedroom answering questions about aneurysms," he said, "I would have been arrested with the others, wouldn't I?"

"Sure," said Clemons.

"Which would have killed me as a doctor forever."

"Probably."

"No question about it." Dr. Hadley paused. "I don't know how I can ever thank you, Mr. Clemons. You saved my career."

"You already thanked me," said Clemons earnestly, "by finding this lump here—" he touched his abdomen "— that I didn't know I had. It could kill me anytime, my doctor says, anytime, without warning. So I was just returning a favor, see?"

Dr. Hadley smiled. "In that case, we're even, aren't we?

Would you care to shake hands with me, Mr. Clemons? I'll try not to be such a naive innocent again."

Clemons looked doubtful. "It won't be easy for you," he said, "because the way I figure it, you're just a natural-born trustee, Doc." He raised his eyebrows in inquiry. "You'd probably trust me, for instance, wouldn't you?"

Dr. Hadley said, "I certainly would, Mr. Clemons. With my life."

"There you are." The big man climbed to his feet. "Already you're being taken in by another phony."

Hadley stared at him. "Phony?"

"Sure." Clemons dimple showed plainly as he grinned. "I'm not Mr. Clemons, Doc. I'm Lieutenant Jerry Malone of the Bunco Squad, city police. I just stood in for Clemons yesterday because I know the con routine. You see, Doc? You gotta be careful!"

NEXT MONTH:

THE DOG

by PAULINE C. SMITH

The retarded youth's big sister hated dogs—even the pup that existed only in her brother's imagination. But even a phantom pet can become deadly when it suffers sufficient maltreatment.

A Man's Love for His Wife May Be Hotter Than Hades.

by WILLIAM P. NOBLE



ALL
IN A
DAY'S WORK

THE LIGHTS from a passing motorist sprayed across the darkened living room and startled Merwyn for an instant. But then the night folded over him again, and with a sigh he leaned back in his chair.

He snuffled slightly as the overwhelming sadness returned. "Ah Mary, Mary," he murmured, "it would have been a beautiful surprise."

He reached to the floor and felt the familiar bottle. With a quick urgency he lifted it.

Aiee! his throat and stomach cried out as the fiery liquid burned his vitals. His breath came hoarsely as the warmth of the liquor spread through him.

He was suddenly conscious of the paper in his other hand. Every word he knew, every syllable. The careful, slanted

handwriting, the blue-black ink, even the fine point from the pen he had given her last Christmas.

Mary! his mind cried as the words she had written bubbled once again before him . . .

Jack and I are going away together, far away from here. This is no sudden thing. Our marriage has been dead for years, and I knew it even if you didn't. Please don't let whatever bitterness you feel consume you . . .

And there was more about what to do with some of the furniture and silver from her family as well as the name of her lawyer. He shivered suddenly and glanced through the window.

Outside, the dark winter's night looked forbiddingly cold.

This house never was insulated too well, he reminded himself. If it dropped into the teens tonight, he'd need more heat.

Merwyn snatched the bottle again and, as he tipped it, a little spilled on his shirt front. With his other hand he started to dab away the spreading stain when he realized he would be wiping with Mary's note.

"Can't do that," he said aloud, "Got to keep this."

Once more her words flashed

at him. *Jack and I . . . Jack and I!* Like a recording.

He slammed his fist down on the edge of the chair. Good old Jack, funny old Jack. The most popular bachelor at the country club, always tanned, driving a silver Porsche, youngest sales manager in his company.

Why, Jack had even spent a couple of weeks with them when his apartment was being painted . . . and he'd been playing tennis with Mary a lot lately.

Merwyn shook his head at how blind he'd been. Only last week he'd called home from the annual sales conference in New York, and he'd heard a man's voice in the background as he spoke to Mary. "Oh, that's just Jack." She had laughed. "The car had a flat today, and he drove me home after indoor tennis. I had to invite him in for a drink, didn't I?"

Merwyn had understood, had even asked to speak with Jack.

"How you doin', buddy?" came the cheerful friendly voice.

"Appreciate what you did for Mary," Merwyn had said.

"No trouble, no trouble. Always a pleasure to help out a beautiful lady."

They had made a date to play tennis the next weekend.

He let the note slip from his fingers and clenched his eyes against the picture of Mary and

Jack—putting their suitcases in the car, laughing at what he would say when he came home, driving away together.

It could have been so different, one part of him shouted. The money, the new job, no more long sales trips. He had only found out that morning. A phone call from his boss before breakfast, while he struggled awake in the unfamiliar motel room.

"You ready for some good news?" his boss had said.

Merwyn had grunted an answer.

"How'd you like to be promoted to a desk job, let somebody else do all the traveling?"

When Merwyn found his voice, he said it was exactly what he wanted, that he was tired of being away from Mary so much. Well then, his boss had chuckled, hadn't he better get home and let her know?

So he had left at once, debating for only an instant about whether he should phone Mary ahead of time or simply surprise her.

I want to see her face, he finally decided. *I want to be able to remember her look when she hears that I'll be home almost every night from now on.*

He had taken the morning train and, by two o'clock in the afternoon, he was pulling up outside his front door. As he

hurried up the front porch steps, he was humming, "Happy Days Are Here Again." In his arms he carried a lush bouquet of roses.

The note had been on the hall table inside the front door. She had propped it up against the tennis trophy he had won at the club the year before.

Mary and Jack . . . Mary and Jack . . . his mind pounded. He stood up and walked to the kitchen, his fingers flexing to ease a growing stiffness.

"I'll get them," a voice inside him thudded. "Wait until I get them!"

He reached for the wall phone and hugged the receiver to his ear. In the faint light from the street, he examined his watch. Five forty-five—there was still time.

His mind fixed on Jack's toothy smile, the crinkles around the eyes, his languorous body movements . . .

He paused to remember the telephone number. Then, with a quick nod, he dialed. A grim smile crept to the edges of Merwyn's mouth. Plant the seed, start the rumor, let human nature take its course. . .

The female voice on the other end announced the familiar company name. Merwyn asked to speak with Jack.

In a moment Jack's secretary came on. "He's not here, sir.

Would you care to leave a message?"

"When do you expect him back?" Merwyn's throat felt unusually tight.

"Oh, he'll be gone for at least two weeks. He's on a lengthy business trip."

"Perhaps you had better let me speak to his superior."

"I'm sorry, but he's in conference."

"Do as I say!" Merwyn shouted.

"Y-essir," the girl replied. In another moment a man's voice responded with a gruff, "Yes?"

Merwyn held the receiver so hard beads of perspiration popped on his forehead. He took a deep breath.

"Never mind who I am," he said. Then he asked if the company employed Jack.

"Yes, but—"

"Do you know where he is right now?"

"Of course," the man said impatiently. "He's on a swing through our regional offices." There was a pause, then, "Wait a minute. Why should I tell you?"

Merwyn interrupted. "You better check how much he took for expenses. And—oh—find out if he's travelling with a companion." He added softly. "I mean—well I don't know how he can do his job if he has his mind on other things . . ."

There was a gasp from the other end, and Merwyn's voice grew harsh. "This is not a joke." He hung up.

He leaned against the counter, fingering the side of his face. It was wet, and he was suddenly irritated at himself.

"C'mon—c'mon. What've you done except plant the seed? They deserve it." He nodded, "They deserve it."

Then his thoughts jumped quickly. What about the police? Would they bring them back? Could they? At least they should be told. Even if it only meant having Jack's name on their books for future reference.

He reached for the phone, then stopped in mid-air. No, the police would interfere, ask a lot of questions, let everybody know Mary and Jack had gone off. Merwyn slowly replaced the phone. *I'll take care of this myself*, he decided.

He blotted the perspiration from his face and thought about the worrisome things he might tell Jack's banker—his broker—his accountant.

A sledgehammer suddenly seemed to bang in the corridor of Merwyn's head, a thudding, jolting blow that made him put his hand over his ears and press his temples. Jagged flashes shot before his eyes, and he flung his arms wildly as he fought to gain his breath.

He buried his head in his hands and huddled on the kitchen counter squeezing himself to soften the blows from the sledgehammer. Then, as quickly as the pain had come, it drifted away.

He shook himself upright, uncertain about what had happened, yet conscious of a tingling at his nerve ends. He rubbed his shirt collar and realized it was covered with perspiration. Then his shirt—and the inside of his pants.

I'm soaking, he thought with disgust. Everything's drenched. The air around him seemed so heavy, so thick. He ran his fingers along the molding of the kitchen cabinets, and they came away wet. A little while ago, he remembered, we couldn't get enough heat in

here. Now it was like a boiler factory!

He walked unsteadily to the cellar door, opened it and listened for a moment. Then he started down and, with each step, the grimness around his mouth began to fade. By the time he had reached the furnace he was grinning, and with an easy motion he opened the furnace door. The roaring reds and yellows and blues shot back at him and seared his face. He turned away from the heat, but in the firelight he spied the bloodstained remains of a tennis trophy.

As he stooped to retrieve it, he gloated over the memory of Mary and Jacks' faces as he walked in on them in the kitchen, with Mary's note dangling from his fingers. . . .

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